
A Step into The Past

Book 16

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Translation by kohchun (<http://www.spcnet.tv>)

PDF Creator by Chans

PDF Created on 13 March 2015

Chapter 01

Empress Dowager Yanyan

Amongst the palaces Xiang Shaolong has seen, the scale of the Chu palace is second only to that of the Xianyang palace, but it is the most tightly guarded.

The palace city is surrounded by thirty foot high walls with an elaborate tower in each of the four corners. The walls are completely encircled by a fifty foot wide moat with clear waters that allow one to see the bottom. The most formidable are the wooden stakes that stick out of the middle of the moat, making it difficult for one to swim across. There are two city gates which can be raised or lowered for traffic.

Behind the high walls are layers upon layers of palace halls and rooms which are mostly either part of the outer Royal Court or the inner palace courtyard. The central enclosure is bounded by an inner wall with two bell drum-towers. An inner palace gate is set in the link-way between the outer Royal Court and the inner courtyard.

The overall layout is symmetrical about a central axis, with a main street connecting the North and South city gates and the inner palace gate. Eight large palace halls and close to sixty courtyard houses are laid out tidily around the central axis on both sides of the main street, with marble fishponds, foot bridges, running water and ancient trees reaching the sky, magnificent and handsome.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan entered the palace through the North entrance. They traversed a large square and a bridge over a transverse brook before reaching the two main palace halls 'Political Discourse' and 'Rites and Ceremonies'. Both halls were built on white stone terraces with encircling paths and railings. The atmosphere was solemn and magnificent.

Of the six other smaller palace halls, four were part of the outer Royal Court and two were part of the inner palace courtyard. They were all named after characters from the Chu mythology. The outer Royal Court halls were named 'Fire God', 'River Goddess', 'The God of Punishment' and 'Fate'.

The inner courtyard halls were named 'Fragrant Martyr' and 'Witch'.

As he was listening to Li Yuan's introductions, the hall which left the greatest impression on Xiang Shaolong was the 'Witch' Hall. Simply going by these names, it can be seen that amongst the nations, the Chu people were the most ingenious and romantic. One could forget about such audacious and innovative names for palace halls in the other states.

At the same time, his heart was charged with electricity.

Earlier, Li Yuan had raised the issue of killing Lord Chunshen, then side-tracked to another topic, apparently to give him time to digest this hard-to-swallow proposal. He thus recalled Li Yuan's worries.

Lord Chunshen has wielded power for a long time after all, with a thousand lackeys under his wing. He has a lot of prestige in Chu, is strong in every department, and has hard stems and deep roots.

If Li Yuan kills him personally, he could incite unrest. He therefore has to find a scape goat, that man being Xiang Shaolong.

Once he reached Shouchun, he had unyieldingly chased away the Li Chuangwen who had forcibly seized the Dian King's Mansion, appearing to be completely oblivious to the consequences. In Li Yuan's eyes, he looked like a heroic and straightforward person.

If he could prompt Xiang Shaolong to assassinate Lord Chunshen, he could push all accusations onto Wan Ruiguang. In this way, he could also neutralize the Zhuang family's attempt to reclaim their country and even take Madam Zhuang for himself, killing three birds with one stone. There was no stratagem that was more malicious than this.

Those who stood on the side of Chu all wished to use Li Ling's hand to flatten the vassal state and bring it back under Chu's control*. It appears that Li Yuan, Lord Chunshen and Li Ling were like snakes and mice in the same nest, merely paying lip service to the beauty Madam Zhuang!

* We need to remember that the vassal states had stopped abiding by Chu after King Xiaolie took over, and were subjects in name only.

The horse carriage entered the inner palace gate into the inner palace courtyard. This was where the Chu King handled daily government affairs and lived his daily life. The main buildings were the two palace halls 'Fragrant Martyr' and 'Witch', and six palaces** to the East and West. Each palace was composed of four courtyard houses. There were also three gardens, the 'Imperial Garden' on the main street and the East and West Gardens on the East and West streets. The scenery was harmonious and boundless.

Li Yuan was clearly learned, explaining the folklore behind the names of the palace halls one by one. His style of conversation was elegant and filled with an enchanting charisma. It is no wonder that even though her heart belonged to him, Xiang Shaolong, and even knowing that Li Yuan was not a good guy, Madam Zhuang was unable to restrain her emotions with him.

At this point, he was talking about the River Goddess and the Witch, and with a laughing voice said: "Our two most beautiful goddesses. the River God and the Witch, do not inhabit Chu's borders, but are from Han's Luo River and Qin's Mount Wu respectively. Laughing with the lips and eyes, indistinct and abstract as spirits, inhabiting distant rivers and mountains, it is fascinating to think about."

Xiang Shaolong said: "Regarding the matter about Lord Chunshen that Imperial Uncle mentioned...." Li Yuan patted his own brows amiably and said: "Let's discuss this again at a later date. I think Brother Wan should first spend more time to clearly recognize Lord Chunshen's true face and verify that I, Li Yuan, am not slandering a good person. Brother Wan can then make his decision. Brother Wan should nonetheless remember that this is a matter between us men. If the ladies knew about this, not only will they reveal it in their countenance, it will cause them to worry all day, doing more harm than good."

Xiang Shaolong silently praised this brilliant move, and naturally nodded his head in agreement.

Li Yuan is trying to deceive him, he is also trying to deceive Li Yuan, tit-for-tat,

both sides should not have any cause to grumble.

At this moment, the horse carriage was following the East road. The question was where was Tian Dan's location?

Li Yuan laughed and said: "I have an official residence outside the palace that is ten times the size. I prefer to stay within the palace nonetheless, and I spend the large proportion of my time here.

Xiang Shaolong mused: the real reason is that you want to be close by to control Li Yanyan.

As the guardian opened the carriage door, Xiang Shaolong collected his disparate thoughts and followed Li Yuan down.

Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong sat down within the main hall as host and guest. A pretty servant maid proffered some fragrant tea.

As Xiang Shaolong's eyes took a sweep of the place, he realized that Li Yuan was a man of taste.

In the direction of the Royal Court and the central axis is a row of eighteen doors with louvre windows. The pond on the terrace was adorned with miniature pavilions and rock mountains, and was forded by a stone bridge. The courtyard was wider than five hundred paces, and planted with Camellias and Chinese Cinnamon. It was just before summer and the Camellias were in full bloom. With the smell of cassia and tangerines floating in the air, the red and white strived with each other, creating a colorful scene

of Spring.

The furniture in the hall were all made of intricately carved fragrant pear wood, with the seats were covered with brocade. All kinds of decorative ancient porcelain and engraved screens could be found everywhere. Xiang Shaolong knew that his taste was not at this level.

If not for the fact that he had obtained Ji Yanran's affections first and that they had shared all kinds of extraordinary circumstances, he might really have lost to Li Yuan in that contest for Ji Yanran.

Because the North hall faced away from the Sun and was close to the pond, it was cool and refreshing, relieving the summer heat.

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan sat calmly in the middle of the hall enjoying the fragrant tea, for a moment he felt it difficult to treat this apparently honorable, bright and talented man as an enemy.

To think that this chap was so formidable, feigning closeness as family and brothers to attack the heart of this forsaken and homeless man. Of course he couldn't 'disappoint' him.

As he was about to feign thankfulness, Li Yuan clapped his hands lightly and said in a crisp voice: "Brother Wan should take a bit of time to observe the situation, then think over my story. Ai! Li Yuan is not afraid of having deep conversations with relative strangers because of righteous indignation for my Great Chu's future, nothing else."

Following his clapping, four well proportioned beauties wearing the Chu dress and veiled caps came from a side door with dancing steps. As they arrived in front of the two men, they knelt, paid their respects and with a graceful subservient posture, sat down within arm's reach of the two men.

The veils covering their faces caused them to be even more enchanting.

Only now does Xiang Shaolong realize that without Yanran, people will have an excellent way to bribe him.

He couldn't help having a cold sweat wondering what would have happened if he hadn't obtained Ji Yanran. It is all thanks to the fact that Li Yuan only knows the poems and songs of Chu but does not know any aphorisms like 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' nor any 'sweet honeyed stories'.

Li Yuan said: "When we seal friendships, if its not with beautiful women then its with gold. These four women come from different lands, each having windy passions, each being one out of a thousand women, and each being virgins who have never tasted sexual intercourse. Brother can take their veils off one by one, see which is the most pleasing to the eye and take that one as my meeting gift." Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in his heart 'formidable!', Li Yuan could be the most adept at psychological tactics amongst the people he had met.

With the opportunity to remove the veils of all the women and to select one, his curiosity was piqued and he felt the high level arousal of violating other people's private areas.

Even though he had no intention of accepting the beauties, he still felt a strong impulse to unmask the women for a look.

Of course he couldn't do this.

With a sinking countenance, he said: "I appreciate Imperial Uncle's kindness, but I, Wan Ruiguang, do not care for anything other than reclaiming my country."

On hearing this, Li Yuan was not angry but was pleased instead. Laughing out loud and chasing away the four women, he said: "Don't know if Brother Wan knew that the certain Li was deliberately testing you, seeing if Brother Wan would be distracted with sex. Since it is this way, I am even more relieved."

He clapped his hands again, and the pretty maid servant brought fine wine and food. Both men took a small swallow from the small wine cups and started talking freely.

Li Yuan spoke rapidly, continuously asking after the situation in Dian, expressing great concern. Thankfully Li Yuan was even more ignorant of Dian affairs than he was, and whenever Xiang Shaolong was unable to answer, he casually fabricated some exotic custom to bamboozle Li Yuan. Li Yuan also could not find any gaps in his story. In those days when he was undergoing military training, he had gone to many parts of China. Hence he recognized their terrain and culture, and could give a passable discourse.

As they were halfway through the meal, a sentry reported that the Empress Dowager had arrived.

Xiang Shaolong had a fright and was about to retreat when Li Yuan calmly and unhurriedly instructed his men to remove the food and wine, and then led him behind a screen and said: "Brother Wan can hide here. When you hear me ask about helping you reclaim your country, you will know who is getting in the way."

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice: "What if I am discovered by the Empress Dowager?" Li Yuan slapped his chest in guarantee and said: "When younger sister and I speak, there is never anyone else around. If there is any issue, I will bear all responsibility. I won't let Brother Wan suffer any grievance. But remember to just keep quiet and listen, do not look."

The last time as Dong Horse Fanatic, he had to play a vulgar hero. This time Wan Ruiguang has been seen as a brave and selfless hero by Li Yuan. Xiang Shaolong could only pretend to foolishly and blankly accept this absurd arrangement. With the jingle of girdle ornaments, the incomparably delicate and graceful woman who had mesmerized King Xiaolie arrived.

With the sound of closing doors, he heard the footsteps of the imperial guards retreating outside the door.

As Xiang Shaolong recalled Lord Longyang and Madam Zhuang's description of Li Yanyan, how could he abide by Li Yuan's instructions? He placed his eye on the screen aperture, looking towards the center of the hall.

His one look took his breath away.

He could not believe that he would see a person whose beauty and

demeanor were both comparable to Ji Yanran and Qin Qing.

To be honest, she was still half a step below Ji Yanran in terms of charm and beauty, and falls short of Qin Qing's grandeur and elegance. Nonetheless she has a whiff of that 'seep into the bones' kind of universally moving, frail and feeble look that causes all who meet her to sympathize with her. At this moment, she prettily stood at the center of the hall with a lightly crinkled brow. As long as one is a man, one will have a strong urge to rise up and embrace her in sympathetic and tender love. She is the kind of person that will cause honorable men to desire to pull her to a couch in search of happiness but not be able to bear adding to her the little more injury; the kind of woman who will overturn nations.

Madam Zhuang was right. Her refined and elegant-as-jade appearance was shrouded by an insipid wisp of indescribable sorrow, appearing as if there is nothing left in this world that can cause her to regain her happiness. Li Yanyan's head sported a cloud bun. Even her fringe was made like a cloud, placed on top of her long delicate eyebrows which reached her temples, really fitting the description 'cloud bun thick obvious fragrance dense eyebrow dye'. (I think this is some kind of classic look)

The hair on her temples are loosely combed in a curvy style, thin and translucent, and dimly discernible like cicadas' wings. This further emphasized her consummately beautiful almond-shaped face and her sorrowfully beautiful eyes.

Slim and graceful, with a delicate body in balance. Coupled with a phoenix crown and an emerald dress, this gave her a larger than life, hard to

surmount, aloof and remote, immortal beauty.

She was adorned with all manner of ornaments, but the most eye catching piece was the necklace hanging from her powdered neck and sitting on her silky bosom. The upper tier was made from twenty plus jewel embedded gold beads while the lower tier held a piece of dew-drop shaped jade as the anchoring ornament, reflecting the sparkle from the jewel encrusted phoenix crown on her head, sparkling and translucent, dazzling and brilliant, but not at all diminishing her delicate and refined essence that transcended all riches and honor.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help feeling shocked at her beauty.

If she was willing to mount the couch with him, Xiang Shaolong would be sure to do it immediately.

At this moment, Li Yuan came behind her and gently helped her remove her outer robe, exposing her gold-lined black long dress decorated with delicate phoenix motif embroidery. Her waist was bound with a jade belt, displaying a grand and magnificent attitude.

As Li Yuan's fingers touched her fragrant shoulders, this so-named Empress Dowager's delicate body shuddered visibly, and she even lowered her gaze with a very strange expression.

Xiang Shaolong's heart jolted, thinking that the two of them are not brothers and sisters, but also realizing that if this was the case, how could they have fooled Lord Chunshen?

Even if one wanted to, it was not possible to pass oneself off as someone of Li Yanyan's nationally renown class of beauty.

As Li Yanyan's plump and smooth sexy lips trembled lightly, she said: "Why is Elder Brother here? I made an appointment with Xiu'er to come see the latest embroidery!"

With a sweet and clear voice that carried a jingling and magnetic tone, heaven has truly been kind to her.

As Xiang Shaolong has gone through these many years of setbacks and calamities, he can actually meet outstanding beauties like Madam Zhuang and Yingying and remain calm and show no interest like an old meditating monk. But this time as he is stealing a look at Li Yanyan, he knows he is about to lose his battle.

At the same time, he had a vague thought that perhaps Li Yuan wanted to obtain Ji Yanran simply because the Talented Lady Ji was the only one who could take Li Yanyan's place in his heart.

Could it be that the two brothers and sisters have an unmentionable relationship?

It was a given in this era that a husband has many wives.

When women are married to men of status and rank, some of their older and younger sisters and even nieces will follow to the groom's house as concubines, not to mention maid-servants as part of the dowry.

Even more discriminating, when a monarch marries off a daughter, lords of the same clan or even close friends will send some of their women over as gifts to be concubines.

Besides this, the aristocracy and ministers may bring any woman they fancy into the palace. It is obvious that they will have many concubines.

Families with many wives are chaotic, with fratricidal fighting and confusion over precedence happening easily.

It is very likely that Li Yuan and Li Yanyan have the same father but different mothers. A talented man matches a beautiful woman, not to mention that Li Yuan is a wolf with a savage heart, desiring to use Li Yanyan to emulate Lu Buwei's devious plot. He even caused Lord Chunshen to think that he is old but still vigorous in mind and body, giving rise to a son in his old age, then switching her to marrying King Xiaolie this other muddle-head. One can imagine how once King Xiaolie met Li Yanyan, he forgot even his father's surname and given name. How would he know that the 'miracle' in her body is actually concocted by Li Yuan? If Xiang Shaolong had not found out about the relationships between Li Yuan, Li Yanyan, Lord Chunshen and King Xiaolie from Zhao Mu, and also understood Li Yuan's unscrupulous character, he would never have been able to arrive at this shocking deduction with just this one act between two people and their momentary expressions.

As he thought about how Li Yuan would rather have killed him than let him have the opportunity to see the two of them alone, Xiang Shaolong's breath quickened unconsciously.

As Li Yuan ushered Li Yanyan to a seat, he gently said: "Xiu'er is presently embroidering in the East wing. It is rare for us to have a chance to talk, let elder brother and Yanyan exchange a few words, ok?" With these words, Xiang Shalolong knew that even though it appeared that Li Yuan had run into Li Yanyan by accident, it was actually arranged deliberately to allow himself to listen in on some conversation that is slanderous to Lord Chunshen, to seal himself as the tool to assassinate Lord Chunshen.

This is because Li Yuan should have known Li Yanyan would have come after lunch to see Guo Xiu'er's embroidery. This perverse and sleep depriving relationship must have been difficult to bear, that is why this most powerful person in Chu condescends to come here. It could be seen that her relationship with Guo Xiu'er is very good.

Li Yanyan sighed and said: "Speak!" Li Yuan pretended to tremble in fear in front of this sister of his, gave a dry cough, cleared his throat and said: "I wish to discuss the matter of the Dian Princess mother and son's request for troops to help them reclaim their country."

Li Yanyan coldly said: "Elder brother must have fallen for the chaste Princess."

Li Yuan, knowing that "Wan Ruiguang" was listening, became uneasy and unhappily said: "How can Yanyan look upon Elder Brother this way? I am but thinking on behalf of Great Chu. The late king has just passed away, if we remain unmoved by the Dian Princess mother and son's request, it could provoke the other vassal states' desire to secede. If they lean towards Qin, Chu will be in danger!"

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh, Li Yuan was giving such a fervent speech, he is really going through a lot of trouble on his behalf.

Li Yanyan was silent for a while, and laughed dully saying: "This is not something for you or I to decide. We must consult the generals and ministers, if not there will be controversy. Has elder brother raised this with Lord Chunshen?" Once King Xiaolie passed away, Lord Chunshen immediately became the person in the Chu court with the most decisive role in both military and civil matters. It was also because of this, that Madam Zhuang toiled to rush to Shouchun to plead for Lord Chunshen's benevolent assistance. How could she know that Lord Chunshen is the one in the background trying to eliminate the mother and son?

Li Yuan played the savior, and said in an upright and unafraid manner: "Of course I have, but Lord Chunshen is adamant and determined to use Li Ling to control the vassal state. Madam Zhuang aside, he is also looking to eliminate the rest of her party. Ai! If Li Ling becomes dominant, do you think that he will follow the King's orders? That is why Elder Brother has to raise this issue with the Empress Dowager."

This is the first time he has addressed Li Yanyan as Empress Dowager.

The Xiang Shaolong who was peeking in rapt attention secretly exclaimed 'formidable!', no matter whether this speech is real or fake, when Li Yuan delivered it to the Chu Empress Dowager, even the false turned real. If he was the real Wan Ruiguang, he would definitely had believed without a doubt, dying with the horizontal stroke, following Li Yuan's orders to fight his fight.

Li Yanyan muttered irresolutely to herself for a while, then unhurriedly said: "I requested for Elder Brother to invite the Dian Princess mother and son to the palace for a few days. How is that coming along? If they come here, then nobody will be able to harm them. Ai! The widow and the fatherless child leads one to pity."

Xiang Shaolong was moved in his heart, and as he listened to Li Yuan explaining Madam Zhuang mother and son's reason for declining, mused that Li Yanyan's intention was actually so good. Looks like all her past actions have been forced out by the Li Clan which is headed by Li Yuan, no wonder she is so unhappy.

As he was still in perplexed thought, he heard Li Yanyan's gentle voice saying: "Elder Brother, you must go see the Dian Princess immediately. No matter what you do you, you must get the mother and son to come into the palace together with all her people. By no means must we allow them to come to harm. Zhuang Jiao has made matchless contributions to our Great Chu. With their past loyalty, no matter what we must show them a little sympathy!" Li Yuan secretly celebrated for having achieved his goals, and only after getting up did he realize that Li Yanyan had no intention of getting up. He was puzzled and asked: "Isn't Yanyan going to meet Xiu'er?" Li Yanyan dully replied: "I would like to sit here alone to contemplate some issues, nobody is to disturb me."

Li Yuan couldn't help turning his head and glancing at the screen, scaring Xiang Shaolong into withdrawing his head quickly.

Li Yanyan was displeased and said: "Why is Elder Brother hesitating?" The

next sound was of the opening and closing of the doors. One could imagine how frightened and distressed the Li Yuan was as he was compelled to leave.

Xiang Shaolong was also suffering. If this beautiful woman wants to sit for half a day, he would have to be cooped up there for the same period of time. Li Yanyan's voice sounded out: "No matter who you are, come out for me immediately!"

Once Xiang Shaolong heard this, he was instantly soaked in sweat. If he is beheaded by Li Yanyan just like that, it would certainly be most pointless.

Chapter 02

To Meet Again In a Strange Land

Xiang Shaolong stepped out from behind the screen with dragon-like movements and tiger-like steps, not the least bit afraid. He knelt and kowtowed at a distance, saying in a deep voice: "The stateless official Wan Ruiguang is guilty and deserves ten thousand deaths. May the Empress Dowager convict him."

Li Yanyan coldly looked at him and blandly said: "Raise your head!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly pleased and raised his head while gazing deeply into her eyes, displaying a liberal demeanor, as if completely unafraid of death.

Li Yanyan's delicate pupils emitted a keen light and solemnly said: "Now I will question and you will answer. If there is any hesitation, I will order my men to drag you outside and behead you. Do not take advantage of the fact that I am a woman. I have learned equestrian archery and sword fighting since young. There are very few people who can even think about approaching me."

Xiang Shaolong mused: no wonder you are so daring. He let out a sigh and said: "Empress Dowager might as well behead me. If it is anything concerning the Imperial Uncle, how could I speak without his permission?"

Li Yanyan was displeased and said: "Who is in charge here in my Great Chu?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he couldn't push her too far, and sadly said: "I, Wan Ruiguang, am but a stateless official. I never hoped to survive this trip to Shouchun. I would have been content to put in some effort for my country before dying."

Li Yanyan furiously said: "Do you want to die? I want to keep you alive in vain hope of death, accuse your associates of conspiring against me and bring disaster to your family and clan."

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud and said: "It turns out that in the end you only wish to destroy our Zhuang family. Alright! I, Wan Ruiguang, will just have to accept fate."

He didn't really want to argue with her, just that the situation before him was complicated, and Li Yuan and Li Yanyan's relationship was even more unfathomable. If he surrendered obediently and betrayed Li Yuan, she would surely despise him. It would be more worthwhile to try to test the depth of her compassion for the Zhuang family.

Li Yanyan stared at him fiercely, her complexion flitting from bright to gloomy, obviously unable to decide what to make of this heroic, spirited and death defying yet talented and valiant man.

Xiang Shaolong pressed his advantage and kowtowed by knocking his head heavily three times on the floor, saying: "This is to thank Empress Dowager's compassion and desire to protect our Zhuang family just now. If Empress

Dowager has changed her mind, the small official will still be very grateful. I just hope that my death will appease the Empress Dowager's anger, and hope that the Empress Dowager will be magnanimous and spare Zhuang Jiao's few remaining descendants."

As his words ended, he quickly and nimbly retreated two steps and knelt down again. He then drew his sword and played as if he was going to commit suicide.

Li Yanyan said: "Wait!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not force his own hand. If Li Yanyan had not shouted for him to stop, he would have had no choice but to break through the window on the back door and escape as quickly as he could to the Zhuang Mansion, and then figure out how to escape (Chu).

As he was thinking about the close shave, he put his sword horizontally across his neck like it was done in the movies and laughed bitterly, saying: "What instruction does Empress Dowager have?" Li Yanyan heaved a sigh and said: "Sheathe your sword first, and then come sit in front of me!"

Xiang Shaolong silently sheathed his sword and moved to a point ten steps from her and sat down comfortably. His manner was neither overbearing nor servile.

In this era, heroes are esteemed. It was not certain whether Xiang Shaolong was truly heroic, but he came from the 21st Century where everyone was equal. Even though he observed the customs of the present era and stood on

ceremony when needed, he involuntarily displayed a 'fearing no one, neither heaven no earth' attitude. This caused others to feel that he is distinctively high-spirited.

Li Yanyan scrutinized him for a good while before sighing and saying: "Has Elder Brother ever asked you to assassinate Lord Chunshen?" This time it was Xiang Shaolong's turn to be startled. Li Yanyan was unexpectedly sharp, arriving at this conclusion from the fact that Li Yuan had hidden him behind the screen to eavesdrop and then deliberately slandered Lord Chunshen.

Pretending to mutter irresolutely, he said: "Imperial Uncle might have had this intention, but he has yet to mentioned it to the small official."

Li Yanyan's voice turned cold and she said: "Once you have murdered Lord Chunshen, do you think any member of your Zhuang family will be left alive?" Xiang Shaolong could not really fathom whether she was standing on Li Yuan's side or Lord Chunshen's side and said: "Of course I will become the scapegoat!"

Li Yanyan gazed blankly for a while before saying in puzzlement: "'Scapegoat'. What an odd expression. Having said it though, it does seem like an apt description. Lambs can only be led to the slaughterer."

By this time, Xiang Shaolong is very familiar with the attitudes of people in the royal courts. Li Yanyan is just like another Zhu Ji, unbearably lonely. That is why once she ran into him, she is handily using him to while her time away. With sudden inspiration, he said: "This could also be described as 'A black dog's food is a white dog's calamity'. Isn't this even more apt?" Li Yanyan

failed to comprehend initially, but thinking it through, she laughed with a "Pu Chi" sound. She knew that she had lost her bearing again and restrained herself, though her tone was now warmer, and she said blandly: "You really aren't the brave and straightforward person that you appear to be, only knowing how to use the sword. Ai! Please go! In the end, this has nothing to do with you. I was just angry that you actually had the guts to sneak a peek at me."

Xiang Shaolong did not dare to show his gleeful expression, and after kowtowing to express his thanks, stood up and said: "Would Empress Dowager please show me an open and honorable egress route."

Li Yanyan said: "After I leave, you may leave by the side door to the courtyard and then leave by the back rooms. If you do not wish for your head to roll on the ground, its best not to reveal our conversation to the Imperial Uncle. Otherwise I will not spare you."

Xiang Shaolong took her words as wind past his ears (a.k.a. in one ear and out the other) and casually muttered a response before attempting to retreat to the courtyard. Li Yanyan said in displeasure: "Stand still! Did you hear what I said?"

Xiang Shaolong calmly said: "The small official did not reply because he does not take his head as a matter of concern and hence did not really take the words seriously. However if I had revealed this to Empress Dowager, she would have been unhappy. Even if I am torn apart by five horses, I will still abide by the ruling."

Li Yanyan's apricot eyes glared with fury initially, but gradually softened again as she heard the last few words. She sighed and said: "You are not a wicked and evil person, but are candid and honest. For Dian to have produced a talent like yourself, there is yet hope for your restoration. Go! I don't wish to see you again."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and said: "Didn't Empress Dowager ask Imperial Uncle to order us into the palace just now?" Li Yanyan was irritated and said: "Even then do you think you can meet me so easily? Quickly get lost!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "If the Empress Dowager really wants me to 'get lost', I would rather be killed by you. Has Empress Dowager ever heard of the expression 'Only to be killed, never to be insulted'?" Li Yanyan pretended that she did not hear it, but felt herself being attracted to this person's clever language. He was enchanting and fascinating, a kind of man she had never before seen in her life. Nonetheless, since it was not appropriate for her to continue being in contact with him, she turned around and walked out the main door with a look of exasperation.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to retreat to the courtyard and quickly walked to the rear room. Li Yanyan's beautiful visage has been crammed into his heart. As he pushed open the door to go out, the shadow of a figure floated in with the fragrant wind and bumped into him.

Despite his perturbed mind, he realized that it was a woman. Not daring to let the other party enter his embrace, he stretched out his hands to restrain the other party's shoulders.

The lady cried out in alarm, raised her own hands and pressed against the pit of his stomach, thus borrowing a little momentum to retreat a few steps.

The sound of an abusive female voice came out of the rear room.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the face of the lady that almost crashed into his chest and got a fright. If she wasn't the GuoXiu'er who married Li Yuan, who could it be? As the servant girls behind Gui Xiu're started to swarm round, she cut them off with one hand and said in a loud but delicate voice: "Do not be rude. This is General Wan Ruiguang, a friend of Imperial Uncle."

After giving him a firm and meaningful look, Guo Xiu'er greeted and said: "Mister please forgive your servant for walking around without her eyes." Xiang Shaolong vaguely felt that Guo Xiu'er had recognized who he was, but could not tell where he had exposed himself. He felt a big headache coming, but was also secretly happy. Returning the courtesy, he said: "It should be I who should be asking Madam Imperial Uncle for forgiveness."

Guo Xiu'er shouted to the four servant girls behind her: "Why aren't you quickly going ahead to see if Empress Dowager has left?" The four servant girls have rarely seen this warm, graceful and elegant Madam use such an urgent and strict tone, so while whispering amongst themselves about who this person was, they hurriedly rushed to obey their orders.

Guo Xiu'er gently said: "Is General leaving? Let your servant send the General some ways!"

She led the way, and reaching the back door, she said to the two sentries:

"Go and help General find a horse carriage."

One of the sentries obeyed the command and left.

Guo Xiu'er then found another excuse to send the other sentry away. When only the two of them were left, she softly said: "Xiang Shaolong! I've been thinking about you bitterly. Why have you come here? Is it to deal with Xiu'er's husband?" Only now does Xiang Shaolong know for sure that she has seen through his disguise. He sighed, saying: "How did you know I was Xiang Shaolong?" Guo Xiu'er said softly: "When my hands pressed against your stomach just now, I felt that phoenix shaped jade pendant on you. I have been playing with it and handling it since I was young. Of course I can recognize it! Xiu'er is very happy, you have really been wearing it continuously."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong understand.

Guo Xiu'er serenely said: "Can Shaolong let Xiu'er's husband go?" Xiang Shaolong's heart was extremely moved. If Guo Xiu'er had wanted him dead, all she had to do was shout with her delicate voice, he would then be decimated. However, even though she had guessed that he was here to kill Li Yuan, she was not willing to do so, merely pleading for his mercy. It was clear that she was someone who would not sell herself out once she had made up her mind.

He couldn't help but ask: "Does he love you?" Guo Xiu'er nodded affirmatively, but sighed and said: "What use is that? He has too many women!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew Li Yuan was promiscuous and liked to reward himself with women. He said seriously: "Xiu'er please do not worry, my trip here is definitely not because of him."

Only after the horse carriage had gone far away did Guo Xiu'er emerge from her dejected spirit and return to the courtyard.

As the horse carriage sped out of the palace gates, two mounted men flew over. Xiang Shaolong recognized one of them as the refined and delicate Dong Luzi. This person once created a stir in the Handan martial arts tournament. Together with the other swordsman Lou Wuxin, they were the two most famous experts under Li Yuan.

Dong Luzi reigned his horse deferentially and to conveyed his regards, saying: "Imperial Uncle is waiting for Master Wan at the 'Red Embrace Mansion'. Allow your servant to lead the way."

The other person has already been ordered to defend the changed route. Xiang Shaolong laughed and said: "No need to lead. Isn't the carriage going there anyway? What is this hero's honorable name?"

Dong Luzi was a little embarrassed. They were accustomed to such people running amuck in Shouchun (another disconnect here, sorry). Dong Luzi gave a dry cough and reported his name.

At this moment, the sound of hooves arose. A group of twenty over horsemen were on a collision course with them. The leader was approximately twenty years old and was wearing a nobleman's battledress.

His facial features were coarse but heroic. With one look, one could be sure that this man was braver than most other men. Both his eyes fixed their attention on Dong Luzi, emitting a pair of cold beams, showing an excited expression.

As Dong Luzi saw this youth, he gave a cold snort and said to Xiang Shaolong in a low voice: "Master Wan! This is Lord Chunshen's seventh son Huang Zhan. He is fond of bravery and fighting. In Shouchun, he is either number one or number two in equestrian archery and sword fighting. Imperial Uncle has given us strict orders forbidding us to offend him. If he is disrespectful in speech, could Master Wan please bear with it."

As Xiang Shaolong mused that it is actually one of Shouchun's tyrannical aristocrats, Huang Zhan has cut off the route in front. His people spread out to the left and right, cutting off the traffic on the entire road. Dong Luzi saluted and said: "Dong Luzi pays his respects to Master Huang." Huang Zhan gave a snort and played deaf. He urged his horse on and arrived at Dong Luzi's side, giving Xiang Shaolong an arrogant glance. Dong Luzi hurriedly said: "This is Dian's General Wan Ruiguang who has just arrived in Shouchun."

Huang Zhan's spirit rose and he gently laughed, saying: "So it is actually the Wan Ruiguang who swept Li Chuangwen out the door. Why don't we relocate somewhere and let Huang Zhan experience his brilliance so as to prevent outsiders from accusing my Shouchun of having no capable people."

Xiang Shaolong ridiculed in his heart, this is actually someone who merely likes to flaunt his military might, brave but guileless. No wonder Li Yuan is

able to gain power.

Dong Luzi said in a deep voice: "Master Huang....."

Huang Zhan interrupted him in merciless disregard, saying: "Dog slave! Since when is it your turn to speak."

Dong Luzi lowered his head in silence, but it was clear he was furious in his heart.

Huang Zhan stared at Xiang Shaolong disdainfully and sneered, saying: "Is General Wan afraid?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and said: "Master Huang is overly praising my humble self. This humble self is even less likely to be so arrogant as to think that Shouchun is without capable people. But the sword under my hand is only used on the battlefield to defeat the enemy or perhaps to defend my state's fields and land. Master should understand this truth."

The colour on Huang Zhan's face changed and he said: "Are you deriding that I do not know how to kill enemies on the battlefield?"

At this time Xiang Shaolong is even more certain that this is just a person who merely fond of bravery and fighting. He calmly said: "If Master Huang is interested, he can set a date for a public competition to compare notes. Nonetheless this matter needs the prior approval of your honorable father. Master, please!"

This speech was both hard and soft, a clear statement of 'I am not afraid of you'. Huang Zhan has never met anyone so formidable. After being in shock for a while, he shouted loudly: "That's settled then. The one surnamed Wan had better not cower back at that time."

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and had a good laugh, saying: "Master does not have to worry. Having the chance to compete with experts is something that I, Wan Ruiguang, desire earnestly but am rarely able to fulfill."

Hearing the heroic air and confidence in his laughter, Huang Zhan was startled, turning to Dong Luzi he said: "Fragrant Splendor Pavilion's Little Ju'er belongs to me Huang Zhan. Dong Luzi, you had better not go there in the future."

Once he had finished speaking, he let out a deafening whistle and spurred his horse, leading his people away. The street is now lined with carriages and chariots.

Dong Luzi gazed at Huang Zhan's back with a hateful and poisonous look. Only after leading them to another street did he take a deep breath and say: "I really hope that General Wan can slaughter this chap with one stroke of the sword."

Of all the cities he has been since he arrived in this era, Shouchun has most nightclubs and brothels. The most prosperous neighborhood, which was next to the inner castle, had an intensely fragrant main street aptly named 'Wine God'. Just this street alone contained more than a hundred brothels, entertainment halls and wine shops of all sizes. They were all privately

owned, signaling the prosperity of the place.

According to Dong Luzi, the majority of the song courtesans came from vanquished states. Of these, the women from Yue commanded the highest prices. The 'goods' could have been 'purchased' directly from those places that have been exploited by Chu over the long term. They could also have been captive slaves from vanquished states purchased from the government. Merely thinking about these issues, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed.

The Red Embrace Mansion is one of the largest song and dance establishments in Shouchun. The other two are the 'Vegetarian Goddess' and the Fragrant Splendor Pavilion that Huang Zhan warned Dong Luzi against.

The Red Embrace Mansion is formed from a cluster of courtyards surrounded by high walls. The area inside is divided into seven to eight courtyard houses. The main house was two stories high, with windows facing backwards. This provided a view of the nearby Chu palace with its splendid, densely packed palace halls and rooms, the inner city wall, the moat and Shouchun's famous scenic spot, the Ying Garden. The Ying Lake, which is on the central axis of the garden, looked like a bright mirror embedded in the dense groves of trees. The scenery was harmonious and pleasing. The Dian King's Mansion that Xiang Shaolong was residing in was located at the Eastern end of the Ying Garden.

With Dong Luzi's guidance, Xiang Shaolong ascended to the second story of the main house. Four beautiful, colorfully attired servant girls knelt respectfully in greeting. They used two basins of clear water to wash their

hands and faces. Such a show of ostentation is unmatched in the three Jin states and the strong Qin.

The manager is a big fatty called Shu Qi. This person was a topnotch boot-licker and he rarely had such a perfect occasion. Even Xiang Shaolong felt compelled to give him a reward to ease his own conscience.

Li Yuan was drinking wine in a side room in the direction of the Ying Garden. Accompanying him were the two men who were once defeated by Teng Yi, Lou Wuxin and Yan Fu. Upon seeing Xiang Shaolong, he invited him to join the party, and asked with a serious expression: "Did the Empress Dowager find out that you were sitting behind the screen?"

Xiang Shaolong was electrified, knowing that he now had to choose between buying the favor of Li Yuan and that of Li Yanyan.

He heaved a sigh and said: "Empress Dowager did give me strict orders not to reveal anything, but I, Wan Ruiguang, am not afraid of death. Not to mention that Imperial Uncle has gone all-out effort for the Zhuang family. Yes, I do not know how, but Empress Dowager knew that I was hiding behind the screen."

He had decided to buy Li Yuan's favor, though his reason was quite laughable. It was simply because Li Yanyan was a kind-hearted person. Even if he offended her, he would still have room for maneuver. Li Yuan on the other hand was an all out villain. If he found out that he himself was lying, things would invariably sour.

Li Yuan was pleased and said: "Brother Wan really thinks highly of me. I, Li

Yuan, will naturally spare no effort to defend Brother Wan. Brother Wan can be at ease. Hei! Can you guess how she knew you were hiding behind the screen? I too could only figure out after it had happened."

Xiang Shaolong could not figure out and shaking his head, replied: "Imperial Uncle, please explain!"

Li Yuan said: "There are two factors. First, she had already found out from the sentry that Brother Wan and I were drinking wine and having a chat. Next is the footprint on the ground. When Empress Dowager wanted me to leave, I looked back and saw a footprint leading to the screen, immediately knowing that we had been exposed."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: what a close shave! If he had lied and said that the Empress Dowager had just sat in a daze for a while and then left, he would have been caught lying on the spot.

Li Yuan laughed and said: "Brother Wan! Li Yuan toasts you a cup."

Lou Wuxin, Yan Fu and Dong Luzi all raised their cups.

After the wine had made three rounds, Xiang Shaolong committed himself and said: "Empress Dowager seemed to have a faint suspicion that Imperial Uncle had indeed deliberately raised the matter concerning my country to cause me to confirm the true opponents of my Zhuang family's restoration. She even reprimanded me severely for a while."

Li Yuan said nonchalantly: "Could Brother Wan please relate the whole

conversation with Empress Dowager word by word? This is vital. You must not miss or hide anything."

Xiang Shaolong immediately offered half the story, providing a description filled with half-truths. Of course he had to leave out the most critical parts like how she had seen through Li Yuan's ploy to get Xiang Shaolong to assassinate Lord Chunshen.

Li Yuan frowned in contemplation for a while then continued probing for details, compelling him to reveal even the account of how he pulled out his sword to commit suicide. With a queer expression, he said: "I understand my younger sister the Empress Dowager's temperament the best. She rarely has this many words to say to people. The most peculiar is that she did not punish Brother Wan in any way."

Turning to the rest, he said: "What do you guys think?"

Lou Wuxin and the rest all had queer expressions on their faces, but they all did not dare to reveal their thoughts.

Li Yuan became angry and said: "If I ask you guys to say it then say it! Don't you think I do not know myself? I just wanted to verify with you guys!"

Lou Wuxin lowered his head deferentially and said: "In the end Empress Dowager is a woman, maybe..... Hei! Master should understand my meaning!"

Li Yuan flashed Xiang Shaolong a glance and laughed aloud, saying: "Look at

these big men being so hesitant when talking about women, isn't it ridiculous?"

Now it is Xiang Shaolong to feel strange. If Li Yuan and this beautiful younger sister have an unnatural relationship, he would have been at least a little jealous when she falls for another man. But looking at how happy he is right now, the reality and this theory don't match.

Li Yuan raised his cup for a toast and said: "Let us drink another cup!"

While still confused, Xiang Shaolong raised his cup and answered everyone's toast.

As Li Yuan put down his cup, his eyes were shining with an intimidating gleam. With a voice brimming with hope, he said: "In the end the Empress Dowager my younger sister was not able to endure loneliness and was moved by Brother Wan. Such developments between men and women are the hardest to understand. If only this were the case, Brother Wan has hope to reclaim his country."

Xiang Shaolong secretly scolded him in his heart: First he wants me to be an assassin, now he wants me to be a male gigolo. Shaking his head, he said: "Imperial Uncle has misunderstood. Empress Dowager is only concerned about my Zhuang family's matter, that is why she had a long conversation with me and also spared me. There shouldn't be any male-female relationship."

Li Yuan excitedly said: "Of course we could be celebrating over nothing. But I

will probe her with words. I know her too well. She can hide matters from anybody, but she cannot hide them from me."

Xiang Shaolong righteously said: "If Imperial Uncle asks me to raise my sword to kill the enemy, I will not crease even half an eyebrow. But....."

Li Yuan interrupted him and said: "Good! Indeed worthy of being called a man! However, has Brother Wan ever considered that people who wish to accomplish great things not only mustn't be a stickler for small matters, but must also be completely unscrupulous. If not Brother Wan should not have come to Shouchun. He should instead have slashed his way to Dian and tried to use the sword in his hands to kill the clique of traitors."

(IMHO, this is Li Yuan's most eloquent speech yet. The logic is irrefutable. Is honor in the end hypocritical?)

Xiang Shaolong was stumped, and at the same time became curious about one fact. He asked: "There is one thing I do not understand. In the end Li Ling is Imperial Uncle's clansman, why is Lord Chunshen protecting him while Imperial uncle is against him?"

Li Yuan sighed and signaled to Yan Fu, saying: "Yan Fu, why don't you explain!"

Yan Fu respectfully said: "There are a few things that General Wan does not know. Even in the Li Clan, there are different factions. The most powerful is of course our Master's. The other faction is led by Master's uncle the Great Prayer Li Quan who controls all offerings and sacrifices in the country. He has recently been colluding with Minister Lord Chunshen. Li Ling and Li

Chuangwen belong to that faction and are naturally against Master."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong understand.

On the surface, Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan are on good terms, but underneath they are secretly engaging in a violent struggle. Lord Chunshen is making use of the powers within the Li Clan who were hostile to Li Yuan to set him back. It was precisely because of this that Lord Chunshen changed his position from supporting the Zhuang family's restoration to opposing and sabotaging them. In the end, none of them are good guys.

Under these circumstances, Li Yanyan naturally became the pivotal person. Whoever is able to gain her support will emerge victorious.

The most powerful players in the Chu court are the Right Minister Lord Chunshen and the Left Minister Li Yuan, followed by the Great Prayer, the Great Ancestor, the Great Justice and the Great Historian. Of the latter four, the Great Prayer who is in charge of laws and decrees is the most powerful. With the Right Minister and the Great Prayer acting together, it is no wonder that Li Yuan is at a disadvantage.

Looking from this angle, perhaps Li Yuan is not totally against the restoration of the Zhuang family. This is because once the Zhuang family is restored, they will become Li Yuan's trusted agents and a source of power, and could even help him to stabilize the other vassal states. This would cause his power to increase tremendously, giving him enough power to overwhelm his opponents.

Li Yuan said: "The Empress Dowager's invitation to the Dian Princess and Crown Prince (of Dian) was Li Quan's idea. While the idea sounds noble, it is actually to prevent you from contacting the other vassal states and forming secret agreements to the detriment of Li Ling! Does Brother Wan understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be moved to tears and said: "Many thanks to Imperial Uncle's pointers."

Li Yuan then muttered irresolutely for a while, then continued: "In this matter, let me stall the Empress Dowager. Let us temporarily put aside the matter of Lord Chunshen. The most important thing in front of us is to verify if the Empress Dowager has really taken an interest to Brother Wan. Only then can we decide what to do next."

He stretched himself and rose, saying: "I'll head back to the palace first. Let these other three accompany you to drink and make merry. The ladies here are outstandingly good looking. Brother Wan is guaranteed to be satisfied."

How could Xiang Shaolong be in the mood for prostitutes? He stood up, saluted and said: "I appreciate Imperial Uncle's kindness. This stateless official does not have the appetite for enjoyment and merriment."

Li Yuan saw that apart from his family's restoration, he did not have a hint of interest in anything else. He happily said: "In that case, let me send Brother Wan part of the way!"

They then left together.

Chapter 03

Locked In Constant Strife

Back at the Dian King's Mansion, Xiang Shaolong saw ten over palace guards standing guard at the main gate. Only upon entering did he realize that these soldiers have been personally dispatched by Li Yanyan to protect the Mansion.

The minute he entered the Mansion, he was invited by Madam Zhuang for a discussion. After hearing Xiang Shaolong's account, Madam Zhuang indignantly said: "I did not expect Lord Chunshen to be such an ungrateful person. Despite my late father-in-law favourable treatment of him in the past, he actually colluded with the Li Clan to harm us."

Xiang Shaolong is already used to seeing people repaying kindness with evil and comforted: "The world is full of people who will forgo their integrity for wealth. Fortunately, we do not need to rely on anyone else. Once we dispose of Tian Dan, we will immediately leave this wicked place and diligently work towards the restoration of Dian. Let them kill each other."

Madam Zhuang serenely sighed and softly whispered: "Luckily, I can still rely on you."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and changed the subject, saying: "Did anything extraordinary occur today?"

Madam Zhuang's spirit rose: "It can be said that we arrived at the right time. Each vassal lord has either sent an important minister or has come personally to express their condolences. They all cherish the memory of my late father-in-law's benevolence. Except for the Yelang people who support Li Ling, they have all indicated that if we ever take action, they can provide us with weapons, rations and money. The power of the Yelang people has increased greatly over the last few years. Everyone hopes that we restore our country and suppress the Yelang people's wild ambitions. I heard that even Yelang King Hua Ciwa is also coming to express his condolences."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Will Li Ling come?"

Madam Zhuang shook her head ignorantly and sighed. She smiled bitterly: "If the Chu Court allows him to come to Shouchun, it would mean that Chu has officially recognized his position. I believe Li Yuan will not allow such a thing to happen."

Xiang Shaolong state in a deep voice: "I think there's a high chance that he is already here. Otherwise, Lord Chunshen would not have deliberately invited you back while sending people to assassinate you during your journey. In my opinion, he will be coming together with the Yelang King Hua Ciwa. The very reason Li Chuangwen forcibly occupied the Dian King's Mansion is to help Li Ling showcase his authority. Unfortunately for them, we made it back to Shouchun in one piece. With the death of King Xiaolie, Shouchun became embroiled in a big power struggle. Li Yanyan understood the complexities of this situation which explains why she dispatched soldiers to defend the Dian King's Mansion."

Madam Zhuang's complexion changed: "Shaolong! I am only a defenceless woman who is completely lost when facing such complicated matters. What can we do to counter them?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "There is still one thing we must clarify: Why did Great Prayer Li Quan suggest that we move into the palace? One of the reasons could be to allow Li Ling to openly and pompously move into the Dian King's Mansion. Lord Chunshen can then use our safety as an excuse to keep us in the palace akin to house arrest. Not only can they prevent us from communicating with the other vassal states, they can also openly declare that Li Ling has officially become the Lord of Dian. This method is certainly despicable."

Madam Zhuang angrily swore: "Don't tell me that they can manipulate Li Yanyan so easily?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "We haven't really ascertained what kind of person Li Yanyan is. But from my observation, she is closer to Lord Chunshen and Li Quan in comparison to Li Yuan. Otherwise, Li Yuan would not be wild with joy when he learnt that Li Yanyan and treated me differently."

Madam Zhuang peered at him for a while and nodded: "You are certainly a man who can move a woman's heart. Li Yanyan has always hated men. Maybe she will change on your account."

Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice and said: "She hates men? Is she a lesbian?"

Madam Zhuang was startled: "What is a lesbian?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had a slip of the tongue and explained: "It means she likes other women who are of the same sex as she is. Hei!"

Madam Zhuang pursed her lips and smiled: "I have never heard of anything to this effect. Just that from the time she became mature, she would not touch anything that a man has touched before. She treats men even more harshly. That is the reason why Li Yuan can deduce so much from just an ordinary conversation between you and her."

At this moment, Zhuang Kong entered without even knocking on the door and announced: "The Empress Dowager and the Great Prayer is here!"

Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang stared at each other in shock. This was totally unexpected and they did not know what to do.

With her face covered with a thick veil, Li Yanyan sat on the main seat in the Dian Mansion's main hall which is facing the front door. The Great Prayer Li Quan was standing respectfully on one side holding up the royal tablet. Doughty palace guards lined the two sides of the hall until they reached the hall entrance. The atmosphere was solemn and stately.

After Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong paid their respects to Li Yanyan, the protocol official barked: "Please rise!"

Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong stood up.

Xiang Shaolong carefully stole a glance at that Great Prayer Li Quan. His face was long and narrow and his body was tall and thin, with a beautiful beard reaching his chest. He is around the age of forty and he resembled an immortal or a Taoist priest. It is a pity that his face was pale as a result of overindulgence in wine and women. He has shifty eyes which betrayed his evil character.

The Empress Dowager Li Yanyan calmly enquired: "Has the Imperial Uncle has come to see Princess and the Crown Prince (of Dian) to convey my wishes?"

Of course Madam Zhuang could not lie blatantly and while she was wondering what to reply her, Xiang Shaolong gave a dry cough: "Empress Dowager, Imperial Uncle had....."

The Great Prayer Li Quan let out a cold snort and interrupted: "The Empress Dowager is speaking to the Princess. No one is allowed to reply on her behalf."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to pull out his sword and slaughter him. This lord is really an insufferable bully.

Madam Zhuang coldly hissed: "My younger brother Wan Ruiguang's words are as good as my own."

Li Quan gave a cold snort and looked towards Li Yanyan's heavily veiled face.

Li Yanyan commanded: "General Wan, please speak!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that if he didn't show a little bit of his might, they would lose their standing in Shouchun. He unhurriedly and calmly questioned: "If I may ask the Empress Dowager, is the crafty villain Li Ling presently approaching Shouchun with the Yelang King in tow?"

Li Yanyan and Li Quan trembled at the same time and were stumped on the spot. The atmosphere was extremely awkward and hard to bear.

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were flashing severely. He continued in a deep voice: "Will the Empress Dowager please answer me."

Li Quan recovered from his shock and hollered: "Wan Ruiguang, how dare you be rude to the Empress Dowager?"

Irritated, Xiang Shaolong rebutted: "Great Prayer Li, please forgive my ignorance. I am merely making enquiries regarding my State of Dian. I do not think I am rude in any way."

Li Quan has always been even more despotic than Li Yuan and has rarely been contradicted by anyone. Nonetheless, he could not be unreasonable under the present circumstances and he was momentarily speechless.

Xiang Shaolong icily gazed at him and his lips curled into a cold sneer that caused Li Quan to shiver in fear. He then turned to Li Yanyan carried on displaying a fearless attitude while quietly waiting for her reply.

Li Yanyan serenely answered: "Li Ling did request to come here, but was flatly rejected by me. I am not sure if he is travelling with the Yelang King

though."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "In this case, I will use my head as a betting stake that Hua Ciwa and Li Ling these two colluding villains have both reached Shouchun. If not, why would there be a need to trouble the Empress Dowager and the Great Prayer to come personally to invite us back to the palace?"

Li Quan's face changed colour immediately and loudly shouted: "What audacity!"

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and laughed wildly: "What's so audacious? Since Chu wants to decimate my Dian Kingdom and we are unwilling to bear this insult, I hereby invite Empress Dowager to return to the palace. We will all offer ourselves as sacrifices to our late king and commit suicide. We do not need Empress Dowager to trouble herself on our account anymore."

Li Quan's complexion changed again. If this happens, it will cause all the vassal states to have the desire to secede and may even switch loyalty to the strong Qin. When that happens, it will be an enormous disaster for Chu.

This is the greatest fear of Chu.

Li Yanyan's delicate body trembled slightly and she does not know how to deal with this situation.

Madam Zhuang knelt down while embracing Zhuang Baoyi. Instead, it is this boy who kept standing straight with his head held high and not revealing the

least bit of fear.

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were like an eagle's, staring hard at Li Yanyan.

Of course he would not be so stupid as to kill himself. If necessary, he will run away immediately. Whatever the case, it would be better than being under house arrest in the palace and vulnerable to anyone's attack. His greatest fear is that people will discover the flying needles on his body. By then, even Li Yuan would want to kill him.

At this moment, the noise of clashing weapons could be heard from outside. Li Yuan barrelled in while shouting angrily: "Who dares to hinder me?"

The eight imperial guards outside the door extended their halberds and cut him off.

Li Yanyan ordered delicately: "Let Imperial Uncle come in!"

The halberds withdrew and Li Yuan sheathed his sword. He displayed a heroic spirit as if the whole world is under his feet.

Xiang Shaolong saw Madam Zhuang's beautiful eyes gazing at Li Yuan, betraying an intoxicated expression. While concerned, he could not do anything at the moment.

Li Yuan strode to Xiang Shaolong's side and stood up after paying his respects. Li Quan sneered and said: "Imperial Uncle...."

Li Yanyan coldly cut him off and said: "I will handle this!"

Li Yuan flashed Li Quan a disdainful look and state in a deep voice: "Forgive me for not knowing how to flatter. If Empress Dowager continues to be misled by evil men, our country's demise is at hand."

In defiance of Li Yanyan's order, Li Quan argued: "What is the meaning of the Left Minister's words? Explain yourself or I will hold you accountable."

Following that, he knelt down in front of Li Yanyan and kowtowed: "Empress Dowager, please be the arbitrator. Even when the late king was around, he has never said a single word of insult to me."

Xiang Shaolong mused to himself that this Li Quan was not some decent guy; no wonder he has been bribed by Lord Chunshen. Unexpectedly, the power in Qin, Chu and Zhao has all fallen into the hands of the Empress Dowagers, though for different reasons. Zhao's King Xiaocheng lived an excessive life and died under his extravagant lifestyle. Qin's King Zhuangxiang was poisoned by Lu Buwei, while Chu's King Xiaolie probably died under the hands of Li Yanyan.

(Justin: Li Yanyan did not kill Xiaolie but probably manipulated his lifestyle using her beauty and indirectly cause his death. It is also not due to excessive love making.)

Because Li Yanyan's face was hidden by her veil, she appears mysterious and it was hard to guess her intentions. After a long silence, she slowly said: "Imperial Uncle should refrain from using such frightening words to scare people."

In reality, Xiang Shaolong still does not know where Li Yanyan stands. She seems to be protective of the Zhuang family but this could also be her putting up an act. But one thing is for sure: Regarding helping Zhuang Baoyi reclaim the throne; she is definitely siding Li Quan and Lord Chunshen. Otherwise, she would not have appeared in the Dian King's Mansion.

When she had ordered Li Yuan to bring the entire Zhuang family and staff to the palace this morning, she must have already known of Li Ling's arrival in Shouchun.

Li Yuan heaved a big sigh and remarked with disappointment: "I have already said all that I wanted to say. The past sages have a saying, 'going against the popular sentiment, one will surely fail'. Presently, Li Ling has colluded with the Yelang people and they are forcing their will on the other vassal states and harbour wild ambitions. The ridiculous thing is that some people are turning a blind eye and even lending them a helping hand, causing the vassal states to consider defecting to Qin. Judging by the number of people jostling to visit the Dian Crown Prince since he arrived in Shouchun, we know where the popular sentiment lies. It is definitely not empty talk when I say that the Empress Dowager has been misled by evil men and that the demise of Chu is near. If we lose our South-western territories, the strong army of Qin can invade us directly by marching straight in. Within a month, their soldiers would be outside the walls of Shouchun. At that time, it would be too late to try to appease the vassal states."

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel that Li Yuan is really serious about the Zhuang family's restoration. He may be an unscrupulous man but in the end, he is someone who loves his country and his family.

To a certain extent, if he wants to remain in Shouchun, he would have to cast his lot with Li Yuan.

If Li Yuan is disposed of, he would not be able to survive too.

This matter is really hard to predict. Even if the great prophet of the day Zou Yan were to tell him about this outcome, he would not have believed him.

The kneeling Li Quan cried with a weeping voice: "Empress Dowager, please disregard these erroneous words and slanderous talk. I am only following the instructions the late King left behind. The Empress Dowager should understand."

At this point, Xiang Shaolong finally grasped Li Yanyan's position.

She really isn't in favour of Li Ling nor was she leaning towards Li Quan or Lord Chunshen. Rather, she was following the last wishes of Chu King Xiaolie by trying to use Li Ling to bring all the vassal states back under the direct control of Chu.

Li Yuan has actually discerned that this was an unworkable plan. This together with the Li Clan's internecine struggle has caused the deadlock today.

Xiang Shaolong put himself in her shoes and couldn't help but feel a headache at the choice she has to make.

Li Yuan is actually much sharper than Li Yanyan. At least he has the courage

to go against King Xiaolie's random orders.

Madam Zhuang is still kneeling silently on the floor, her eyes repeatedly scanning Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan. Perhaps she is having trouble choosing between the two.

Li Yanyan heaved a sigh and said: "Let's discuss this issue later! I wish to return to the palace."

Li Quan urgently and fearfully called out: "Empress Dowager!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud: "Great Prayer Li had better tell the traitor Li Ling that regardless of size of his army, I, Wan Ruiguang, vow to cut down the head on his neck."

Li Yanyan's delicate body jolted and she stood up.

Xiang Shaolong, Li Yuan and Zhuang Baoyi hurriedly kneeled down in respect.

Li Yanyan slowly state: "Li Ling's arrival at the capital was without my permission. Li Quan, please instruct him to remain in the Yelang King's Mansion. He is not allowed to step out of the mansion gates at all. If he is still killed by someone despite this, he can only blame his bitter fate."

Turning to Li Yuan, she said: "Imperial Uncle will select a regiment of palace guards to stand guard at the Dian King's Mansion round the clock. If anyone comes to cause trouble, he is to be killed immediately without pardon."

Amidst the sound of the royal entourage returning to the palace, this number one beauty of Chu exited the door with eight palace maids escorting her.

Li Quan's incomparably hateful eyes swept over Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong before he followed the royal party out.

Madam Zhuang personally poured a cup of wine for Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong and flashed Li Yuan an enchanting smile: "Only till today do I know who is sparing no effort to help our Zhuang family. Let us brother and sister toast the Imperial Uncle."

Li Yuan toasted: "One day when I, Li Yuan, am able to defeat the traitors within the Court, I will guarantee that the Dian Crown Prince will be able to sit on the Dian throne peacefully. I will swear with this cup of wine."

Hot tears of gratitude gushed forth from Madam Zhuang's graceful eyes. After the toast, she lowered her head and promised: "The Imperial Uncle has such a profound love for righteousness, even if I have to work like a bull or horse, I will be most willing."

Li Yuan's two eyes gleamed and he said with mucho grace: "The Dian Princess is giving me too much credit."

Even though Xiang Shaolong does not harbour any intentions on Madam Zhuang, he felt uneasy that she is allowing Li Yuan to gorge himself on her. Fortunately he had a broad mind. After drinking a cup, he threw out his concerns.

Madam Zhuang secretly stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong. Her lips cracked into a smile and she gently said: "Ruiguang, you should stop after drinking another cup."

Turning to Li Yuan, she explained: "This little brother of mine can hold his liquor well, but no matter how much he drinks, his face will not turn red."

Xiang Shaolong had a fright and secretly praised Madam Zhuang's attentiveness. His face was covered with thick makeup so no matter how much he drinks; his face is certainly not going to turn red.

Li Yuan smiled: "Dian Princess, please forgive Li Yuan for being presumptuous. I would like to exchange a few words with Brother Wan in private."

Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang were both startled.

Madam Zhuang gently nodded her head and departed the hall. She even helped the two men to close the door as she left.

Li Yuan faced Xiang Shaolong in a daze for a long time before giving a long sigh, declaring: "Xiang Shaolong! I, Li Yuan take my hat off you!"

Xiang Shaolong was immediately frightened out of his wits, his hands pressed down on his sword hilt.

Li Yuan raised both his hands to show that he is unarmed and coaxed: "Brother Xiang should not be alarmed. If I really wanted to deal with you, I

would not have come here to drink wine with you."

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and laughed, asking: "How did you recognize me?"

Li Yuan replied: "The first time I saw Brother Xiang, I already felt that you looked familiar, but felt that this was an impossible matter. Moreover you have grown a long beard and the shape of your face is different. Your hair colour and skin colour are both greatly different from before, plus your speech carried a Dian accent. I had to believe that some people really do look alike."

He continued to shake his head and smiled: "Actually I was here for some time already and was outside the door looking at Brother Xiang's brilliant move of turning the tables around. At that time not only did you forget to mask your voice, you even exhibited your usual bearing. That is something unique to you and there is no other like that. Unless I am blind or deaf, how could I not know you are Xiang Shaolong?"

Xiang Shaolong asked curiously: "Brother Li and I are enemies, so why are you now treating me as a long lost friend and leisurely having an intimate conversation?"

Li Yuan leaned forward and sighed: "The discord between me and Brother Xiang started over Talented Lady Ji. At that time, I really wished I can tear you into pieces. But now, the rice has already been cooked (It is too late to cry over split milk). Ai!"

Deep pain shot out from Li Yuan's eyes. He lamented: "In life, we have to move on. What do I have to gain by killing Xiang Shaolong other than to cause the Talented Lady Ji to hate me for a lifetime? Worse still, if she committed suicide in the name of love, I will be even more miserable."

For the first time ever, Xiang Shaolong is seeing the emotional side of Li Yuan. He was a little moved and apologised: "I did not expect Brother Li to have such magnitude; I have been disrespectful."

Who would have thought that after only two days in Shouchun, he has been recognized by both Guo Xiu'er and Li Yuan. It seems like the disguise is not helping very much. Fortunately, besides Tian Dan, Han Chuang, Guo Kai and a limited number of people, there is no one else in Shouchun who recognizes him.

Li Yuan looked like he was full of thoughts and feelings and after many gasps and long sighs, he state with disgust: "Whether you believe it or not, even if Brother Xiang walks out to the street and shouts loudly 'I am Xiang Shaolong', I guarantee that nobody will dare to touch you. Everyone knows that you are a confidante to the Qin Crown Prince and Empress Dowager. Moreover, the Qin military holds you in the highest regard. If you are killed today, the Qin army will march here tomorrow. Only Brother Xiang doesn't realize this himself! Presently, under the skies, only Lu Buwei and Tian Dan dare to take your life."

Xiang Shaolong checked in a deep voice: "This is precisely the issue that bothers me. Didn't Brother Li and Tian Dan form an alliance?"

Li Yuan fiercely said: "Please do not mention this ungrateful old fox again."

After reaching Shouchun and finding out that Lord Chunshen is more influential than me, he changed sides very quickly and is now supporting him. He just moved into Lord Chunshen's mansion yesterday and even revealed all my plans to Lord Chunshen. Fortunately I have spies in Lord Chunshen's mansion or else I would not even know how I died."

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization and he laughed: "So this is it!"

Li Yuan's brazen face turned red and he asked: "How did Brother Xiang know that Tian Dan has come here?"

There was no more point in concealing the truth from him. Xiang Shaolong revealed the entire story and as Li Yuan listened, he couldn't help sighing and exclaiming how lucky he was.

After all the odds and ends had been clarified, Li Yuan seriously state: "I know it is not easy to get Brother Xiang to trust me completely. Brother Xiang should know by now that I am in a disadvantageous situation. I also know that the two tasks that Brother Xiang wants to achieve: the killing of Tian Dan and the restoration of the Dian Kingdom which are the hardest tasks of all. But if we work together, maybe all these impossible tasks will become easier to accomplish."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Who can refuse this kind of win-win partnership? But I need to understand something first. Does Brother Li know about Lu Buwei's plot to make use of Chu people's hands to kill Xu Xian?"

Li Yuan said: "Of course I know and how could I, Li Yuan, be tricked by Lu

Buwei? If Xu Xian dies under the hands of our Chu people, coupled with the fact that he is coming here to offer condolences to the late King, the consequences will certainly be unimaginable."

In the past, Xiang Shaolong would never have believed Li Yuan. But now after understanding his position and knowing that the most influential person in Shouchun is Lord Chunshen and not Li Yuan, he has no more reason to suspect him.

Right now, Li Yuan's utmost priority is preserving his life followed by power-grabbing.

Just by looking at Lord Chunshen's seventh son Huang Zhan's attitude this afternoon, he can easily guess what the rest of his men are like.

Li Yuan suddenly jolted and exclaimed: "No good!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked: "What's the matter?"

Li Yuan's complexion turned pale and slapping the table in anger, he roared: "Lord Chunshen really doesn't understand the bigger picture. In order to win the trust of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei, he has unexpectedly committed this folly."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. With an ashen face like a corpse, Li Yuan explained: "Fifteen days ago, Lord Chunshen's sixth son Huang Hu led three thousand family warriors heading West on boats. That was the day after we received word of Xu Xian's trip to Shouchun. I was suspicious then, but did

not think that Lord Chunshen would be so senile, not recognizing the gravity of matters."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "In reality, Lord Chunshen and Tian Dan have always been conspiring with each other. You may not know that Zhao Mu is really Lord Chunshen's fifth son. That year, Xiao Weimou came to Wei to kill me as requested by Lord Chunshen."

As Li Yuan heard this, he became mute and stared blankly, knowing that he has been used by Tian Dan while he himself had trusted Tian Dan completely in a vain attempt at getting the help of the Qi people to deal with Lord Chunshen.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand and said: "This alliance is formed!"

Li Yuan exulted and stretching out his own hand with a firm grip, he said: "I have always trusted Brother Xiang."

He turned a little awkward and said: "Nonetheless I also know that Brother Xiang does not dare to fully trust me yet. Right now I swear an oath to heaven that if I violate this agreement, may I be pierced to death by ten thousand arrows."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised him in his heart. This is because if Li Yuan is not able to gain his complete confidence, he needs to safeguard himself in every aspect. It will be a weak partnership.

Thinking about it, he felt hilarious. Not too long ago, the two of them are still

trying to kill each other. Now, being compelled by tough circumstances, they have become comrades-in-arms.

Li Yuan's spirits rose dramatically and suggested: "The first step we will take is to kill Li Ling to show them who's boss, what do you think?"

The two of them looked at each other and broke out into laughter, enjoying the feeling of being well-matched partners.

Chapter 04

Escape by A Hair's Breadth

Xiang Shaolong escorted Li Yuan out of the residence. Li Yuan's thirty-plus bodyguards had been waiting forever. Before mounting his horse, Li Yuan softly asked: "Is Yanran here?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded slightly.

Li Yuan mumbled for a while then laughed bitterly and said: "I am deeply envious of Brother Xiang."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Do you wish to see her?"

At first, Li Yuan appeared pleasantly surprised, then changed his mind and shook his head, saying: "Meeting her is as good as not meeting her. Brother Xiang, please help to convey my regards. Tell her that she, Ji Yanran, is the lady that I love and respect the most."

Laughing at the sky, he mounted his horse and led his bodyguards out the main gate, swift as a tornado.

Xiang Shaolong sighed sadly, shaking his head. He then returned to the residence intending to seek out Ji Yanran to make a report. He was intercepted by Madam Zhuang on the way and led to an empty room. She asked softly: "What did Li Yuan and you talk about?" Xiang Shaolong recalled

her earlier confused and intoxicated disposition towards Li Yuan and was peeved. He coldly said: "It was all about slaughter and bloodshed, nothing special."

Madam Zhuang bent closer and scrutinized his eyes. An unnatural feeling seeped through him from top to bottom. Madam Zhuang laughed with a soft flowery voice, saying: "Shaolong is a little jealous. I am very happy."

Xiang Shaolong thought he might as well vent his anger, saying: "This is not about jealousy. It is about one man having to listen to a woman telling another man that she is willing to become a bull and a horse for him. Its about respect and dignity. Can you please take your hands off me?"

Madam Zhuang drew even closer. She leaned close to his ear, speaking as airily as a silkscreen: "If the person I was saying it to was Xiang Shaolong and not Li Yuan, the words would have been changed to 'becoming a concubine and maid servant'. Does Shaolong understand the difference?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Am I a person who can be deceived or pacified easily? Does Madam dare to say that she is not moved by Li Yuan?" As he said this, he was secretly startled as he realized that he had himself been moved slightly by Madam Zhuang.

He is usually very gracious with women, rarely scolding them or causing them harm. Even towards those like Dan Meimei and Gui Yan who conspired to murder him, he had never had the intention of settling this score with them.

The person who has received the most scolding from him is Zhao Ya, but in

the end he has still forgiven her and he now loves her as before.

So why is he losing his temper on Madam Zhuang?

Xiang Shaolong has met his share of setbacks, and he does not want to be like the other men in this era, treating women as goods where 'the more is the merrier', widely collecting concubines. Nonetheless this is but wishful thinking on his part. It is the women instead who constantly throw themselves into his embrace, gladly and willingly joining his brood of wives and concubines.

Men are not like dense wood, who are unfeeling.

Moreover he is naturally softhearted towards women, that is why he has always been careful, trying to avoid getting entangled in more male-female relationships. Till today, the only one who has caused him to lose his restraint is Qin Qing. He has managed to have self-control with everyone else.

Nonetheless, Madam Zhuang's situation was unique.

Regardless of whether she is successfully restored to her country, she will not become his concubine. It is a matter of status. Madam Zhuang and her son have become the legitimate symbol recognized by all the Dian people. If Madam Zhuang marries out, this symbolism will be destroyed.

She can still have affairs with men, this is after all a common thing in that era.

That is why even if an affair develops between Xiang Shaolong and Madam

Zhuang, it will have to be brief and momentary. Once Zhuang Baoyi ascends the throne and Xiang Shaolong leaves Dian, this bout of passion between them would have to die a natural death.

It is precisely because of the lack of this mental barrier and also because of the fact that Xiang Shaolong has a lot of pity for this isolated and helpless mother and son, that is why without realizing it, he has gradually accepted Madam Zhuang. Perhaps this is a case of 'familiarity breeds fondness'.

He himself was unaware of the fact. Only after reflecting on his present anger did he awaken to this fact.

Despite being scolded, Madam Zhuang react like one who has been reprimanded, and in fact replied with a straight face: "You are right. Li Yuan is indeed a man who has moved my heart. And even if I ignore his righteous anger, I cannot ignore his righteous support of the Zhuang family. If I had not met you, I would have used my body to repay him. But I won't do that now, because I am afraid that you will despise me. Now that I have bared myself like this, are you satisfied?"

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh and said: "However you have now aroused Li Yuan's heart, are you sure you are able to control the situation?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "Do not worry. I have ample experience dealing with men."

She then laughed a foxy laugh before saying: "I did that on purpose just now just to see if I could get any reaction from you the hard-hearted man. Now I

know finally. Ai! Shaolong, let me serve you in the bedroom tonight, alright?"

Xiang Shaolong thought about Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi and hardened his heart, saying: "We had a prior agreement and the larger matter is more important. It is better to put aside our feelings and sexual desires temporarily."

Madam Zhuang was so touched that her eyes reddened. Hanging her head, she said: "You are still the first and only man I have met who helped me for any reason other than my looks." As she said this, she held on to him even more tightly and closely.

Only then did Xiang Shaolong reveal that his identity had been exposed and that he had formed an alliance with Li Yuan. Madam Zhuang was stunned to silence and she listened in a daze. Celebrating the good news, she forced Xiang Shaolong to cuddle with her for a lingering moment before letting him go.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his residence and repeated the story to Ji and Zhao the two ladies. Both ladies also listed in stupefied silence and amazement. It was hard to imagine that the situation would have developed in such an unexpected way.

Ji Yanran happily said: "Li Yuan is self-centered and mercenary, petty and unscrupulous. Nonetheless he is also a knowledgeable minister. Under the present circumstances, forming an alliance with you is the smartest thing to do. Moreover, with you as a friend, perhaps he can deceive Qin into choosing some other country as its first target of conquest."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said: "It is very difficult for me to say anything in this matter. If you do not attack others, others will attack you. Its not just friends who can become enemies, even fathers and sons and elder and younger brothers can fall out and become enemies. The Talented Lady Ji is proficient in history and should appreciate this point."

Zhao Zhi nodded and said: "Hubby is right, let alone the fact that Shaolong now has friends everywhere. Even if he wanted to help, he wouldn't know which country to help first."

Xiang Shaolong confessed: "I am a person who just loves peace and hates war. In the future when the Crown Prince (of Qin) has ascended the throne, let us go far away, look for some plains or valleys with beautiful mountains and rivers and live till we are old. Don't you think that would be so enjoyable?"

The ladies were so moved that they threw themselves into his bosom.

At this moment, Jing Shan came in and reported that the Inner City Official Qu Shiming was seeking an audience.

Xiang Shaolong was greatly astounded. Only after asking Ji Yanran did he find out that the Inner City Official was the Commander of the Inner City Guards. With a belly full of suspicion, he hurriedly rushed to the front hall to receive the visitor.

Qu Shiming was about thirty years old. He had a serious attitude but had a friendly face. He was tall and had handsome features, giving others a very

good impression.

However, this was but a facade. This was because Xiang Shaolong detected within his eyes an essence that was completely different from his external appearance, suggesting that Qu Shiming was the kind of person who would conceal a knife behind his smile.

They exchanged pleasantries.

Qu Shiming then said: "The Empress Dowager has ordered me to come to invite General Wan to the palace. Is General Wan able to leave immediately?"

Xiang Shaolong calculated that it was now the full light of day, and that the route to the palace was through the main street. He should not be afraid of any tricks. Moreover, even if something untoward did arise, he would be able to escape amidst the tide of people on the main street. He nodded in agreement and, mounting a horse, followed the official towards the palace.

Along the way, Qu Shiming pointed out the scenery and buildings and talked jovially, actually providing Xiang Shaolong with a lot of intelligence. At least he now knew that the cluster of imposing buildings beside the palace was actually Lord Chunshen's official residence. Li Yuan's Left Minister's official residence was diagonally opposite that of Lord Chunshen's.

Since Li Yuan had residences inside and outside the palace, it did seem that his relationship with Li Yanyan was closer than that of her with the other members of the Li Clan and Lord Chunshen. It is no wonder that despite

having roused the jealousy of Lord Chunshen, Lord Chunshen had yet to be able to deal with him.

However, with Li Ling entering Shouchun, and with Tian Dan and Lord Chunshen's open collusion, this equilibrium is sure to be upset.

After entering the palace, everyone dismounted.

Qu Shiming said in a low voice: "The Empress Dowager wishes to meet you in her Eastern palace's Heart Nourishing Garden. This is where she usually entertains herself with the zither. If she is in a good mood, she may even play a song for Mister."

Xiang Shaolong secretly wondered, could Li Yanyan really have fallen for himself? Thinking about it some more, he felt that it was an impossibility. How could a woman who hated men suddenly transform within two days?

Dwelling on the thought was futile, so all he could do was follow Qu Shiming.

Eight of the guards were ahead opening the way. The other sixteen guards followed behind. This level of protection did appear a little over-the-top, but it could also have signified Li Yanyan's desire to ensure his safety.

These twenty-four guards were clearly special crack troops. They were all valiant with thick necks and broad shoulders, and all were powerful and skilled fellows. If the entire Chu army was of this caliber, even the Qin people would not be able to defeat them.

At this moment, Xiang Shaolong and Qu Shiming were being crowded by the guards from the front and back while crossing a small lane paved with crushed rocks. All around were luxuriant and tightly packed flowers and plants. With little pagodas and bridges, running water and fishponds, the garden was teeming with life.

On the left beyond the grass and trees was a row of residences, but it seemed as if they were unoccupied.

In the four directions, the place was quiet and empty of people.

Qu Shiming pointed to the residences and said: "General Wan, please take a look." Xiang Shaolong looked where he was pointing, and asked curiously: "Look at what?"

Right at this moment, he suddenly felt a sharp and hard object press heavily against his right waist, emitting a ding sound.

Xiang Shaolong instantly realized what was happening.

Qu Shiming had surreptitiously stabbed at him with his dagger but had hit the concealed sack with his flying needles.

Without thinking, he lashed out an elbow at Qu Shiming's side.

Qu Shiming dropped the dagger as his hand was jolted. As the sound of broken bones was heard from his side, he fell to the ground in distress, but he did not forget to shout: "Attack!"

The first person to move was Xiang Shaolong. Blood Wave, which had been put in a new scabbard to fool people, flew out. The closest two people in front were slashed in the neck and fell to the ground with blood splashing.

Xiang Shaolong knew it was not advisable to match the enemy with force and bending his body, jumped into a small thicket and rolled out the other side. By this time, the enemy had already launched an all-out offensive.

There were two men each on the left and right attacking towards him without regard for their lives, intrepid as insane tigers.

Xiang Shaolong knew he could not retreat and gathered his enemy-crushing fighting spirit. He dashed forward, trampling on an untold number of fresh flowers, but was able to escape the danger of being surrounded. He then turned around abruptly and struck out like lightning using Blood Wave.

These guards were really carefully selected experts. The point person shifted his sword to block the swift and sharp attack, but was unable to block the kick that came from underneath. He was hit in the groin and fell to the ground with a wretched howl.

The two rushing in from behind were unable to change their stances in time and almost tripped and fell to the ground.

Xiang Shaolong rose explosively and swept round with his sword. The two guards dropped their swords and fell to the ground, dying violently on the spot.

At this moment, even more people flocked over from three directions in front. They had all appeared from the underbrush and vegetation.

None of them shouted any sort of challenge but attacked silently.

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden inspiration, and while shouting loudly made a dash towards the residences on the left.

As he was rushing across a small bridge, the sound of wind came from the rear. Xiang Shaolong knew that it was not good and tumbled onto the bridge. Above him a long sword swept past the thin air.

Xiang Shaolong jumped up on the bridge and used a stance of 'attacking to defend', creating waves of sword pressure, causing the two guards dashing up to defend themselves frantically.

With a "Qiang!" sound the person on the left was left with half a sword.

It's a pity that Xiang Shaolong had also lost the opportunity to kill him. While forcing the other person to retreat, he saw seven to eight enemies crossing the stream under the bridge, seemingly with the intention of intercepting him on the other end of the bridge.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the enemy in front of him and jumped on the bridge railing, and with a mid-air somersault, jumped onto a patch of grass on one side.

Two of the enemies immediately threw themselves towards him.

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented. All these people were fierce and skilled in martial arts, and with their sheer numbers, they were fully capable of killing him many times over. If he was surrounded and had to fight a head-on battle, he was sure to suffer an unlucky fate. He ferociously clenched his teeth and rolled on the ground again.

Those two enemies were brave but had never before seen such fighting techniques. As they hesitated in panic, one of them had already been kicked on the lower limbs by Xiang Shaolong's two legs, falling to the ground. The other person was stabbed in the belly by Blood Wave.

In all four directions the garden was filled with human shadows and sword flashes.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the person on the ground and rolled towards a large tree at the side. As he hit the tree, his body leaped up. Three long swords thrust towards him from different angles.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this was a critical juncture. If he could not break out of the encirclement, he would definitely die today. With a wild shout, he used his last resort, the 'attacking and defending at the same time' stance. All three swords were 'stuck' to the sword light that he drew, and they were forced back by his boundless sword power.

In the blink of an eye, all the other people had madly rushed over, encircling him in a death trap.

Xiang Shaolong raised his head and saw that there was a horizontal branch

reaching out above him. Above that, the foliage was even thicker. He celebrated in his heart and, while the enemy was still rushing in, sheathed his sword, leaped up off the ground and with both hands grabbed the thick branch which was as thick as a person's arm.

The enemies jumped up waving their swords trying to attack him.

Xiang Shalong's two legs flew out to the left and right, sweeping at the blades of two swords. The two swords were swept aside.

Both legs then continued to kick out rapidly. Two of the enemies were kicked in the face. Blood spurted out and the two men staggered and stumbled to the ground.

As he used the strength of his waist to climb higher up the branch, the ground below was already filled with enemies.

Three swords flew towards him, having been thrown by some enemies.

Xiang Shaolong pasted himself against the tree trunk, avoiding the swords. He then climbed upwards rapidly.

The enemies had miscalculated, and they stood below looking at him, at a loss for what to do. At this point they could only regret not having brought crossbows.

After he had reached the top of the tree, he was already about eighty to ninety feet off the ground.

Xiang Shaolong was beside himself with joy. He opened his throat and hollered madly to the sentries on the sentry post: "Rebellion! Rebellion!" Four of the enemies had begun to climb upwards.

Xiang Shaolong was not anxious but was instead rejoicing. He drew Blood Wave and attacked downwards. Using the advantage of higher ground, he chopped and sliced, sending the four attackers tumbling down the tree. From observation, it would be hard for them to live.

At this point, Qu Shiming laboriously arrived at the bottom of the tree, clutching the broken bones at his side. He was nonetheless also unable to devise a plan, and with no other choice, he shouted: "Cut down the tree!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud and said: "Thanks for the hard work!"

Given that the tree was thicker than a man's arms could envelop, they would need at least an hour to cut it down just using their swords.

At this moment, an uncountable number of guards spilled over from all directions.

Qu Shiming's complexion changed completely, shouting: "Go!"

However, he was a moment too late. The guards had surrounded both the attackers and the tree. Upon seeing that its their superior Qu Shiming, they all stopped in a daze.

"The Empress Dowager arrives!"

All the guards knelt on the ground.

The Xiang Shaolong who was at the treetop found it inconvenient to kneel in greeting while on the tree so naturally he did not.

He has finally escaped this dangerous assassination attempt.

All because he was lucky.

Chapter 05

Exposed Again

The Empress Dowager's palace.

Qu Shiming and the seventeen subordinates who perpetrated the sneak attack on Xiang Shaolong had been bound and were kneeling before Li Yanyan's dais. Five amongst them have suffered various degrees of sword wounds and were covered with blood. They were all looking very sad and pathetic.

Including Qu Shiming, of the twenty-five would-be assassins, seven had been killed by Xiang Shaolong.

Li Quan and all the major officials who were in the palace at that time rushed over on receiving the news. Of these two were precisely Great General Dou Jie and the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning.

This Dou Jie was originally someone who adhered to Li Yuan, but later defected Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's side after recognizing that Lord Chunshen was more powerful. Cheng Suning has always been Li Quan's lackey. It was him who despatched his nephew Cheng Qi and family warriors to impersonate boatmen with the intention of killing Madam Zhuang mother and son on the Huai River.

Dou Jie and Cheng Suning are both about forty years old, with the former

having a formidable appearance filled with the air of a Great General. The latter has a pale complexion, and one could determine with one glance that he was someone deep into wine and women.

Besides these two there was also Outer City Official Wu Zhan and the Royal Guard Captain Lian Anting who was responsible for the security of the Empress Dowager and the Crown Prince of Chu. Xiang Shaolong leisurely and contentedly stood downward of the dais from Li Quan, followed by Wu Zhan and Lian Anting.

Across from them is Dou Jie and Cheng Suning. Qu Shiming's face is ashen as a corpse and his head is lowered in silence.

Li Yanyan is wearing her phoenix coronet but is without her heavy veil. Her jade face that was peerlessly splendid within Chu carried a severe and frosty expression. Her eyes flashing with prestige, she asked: "Whats the matter here? Who incited this?"

Qu Shiming reported with his head still lowered: "After Wan Ruiguang arrived in Shouchun, he went on a rampage, making it seem like our Great Chu did not have any capable people. Today he even offended the Empress Dowager in the Dian King's Mansion. And even more he has obviously killed people. I was indignant and decided to teach him a lesson. Nobody incited me to do this."

Li Yuan's voice sounded from the entrance, and with a long laugh, he said: "How did Wan Ruiguang run amuck? If you Qu Shiming had your home forcibly occupied by someone else, what would you do?" Everyone looked

towards the entrance and saw Li Yuan walking in rapidly in high spirits. He first greeted Li Yanyan, then came to Xiang Shaolong's side, showing clearly that they were standing together.

Li Quan sneered and said: "There is some discrepancy in the Left Minister's words. How could the two matters be mentioned together? When Li Ling occupied and administered the Dian King's Mansion, the late King was still around but he never said anything to oppose it, clearly....."

Li Yanyan coldly cut him off, saying: "Great Prayer!"

Li Quan glared at Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong and gave a "Humph!", but did not continue. Everyone could tell, though, that what he wanted to say was that Li Chuangwen's forceful occupation of the Dian King's Mansion was with the tacit consent and approval of the devil Xiaolie.

Dou Jie gave a dry cough and said: "Qu Shiming concealed matters from the Empress Dowager and committed an offense in the palace. This is certainly against military discipline, but he was merely aroused by righteous indignation and is pardonable. I hope that Empress Dowager will deal with this leniently."

He is a major figure in the Chu military and even the Empress Dowager had to consider his words. From this, it can be seen that Lord Chunshen now has an overwhelming advantage in power.

Cheng Suning also pleaded for mercy, saying: "Qu Shiming merely wanted to burst General Wan's bubble a little and did not have the intention to kill.

Empress Dowager can see clearly."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "This is strange indeed. None of you were around just now, how could you be sure that General Qu merely wanted to teach me a lesson? Could it be that you have agreed on this from the beginning?" Cheng Suning was stumped to silence and could only glare at Xiang Shaolong fiercely with a poisonous expression.

The Royal Guard Captain Lian Anting bowed and said: "Empress Dowager can see clearly. When the small official led his men to the East Garden, Official Qu and the others were holding their swords. It is not a case of the usual disturbance or fight. Moreover the corpses of the seven people who died are distributed within the garden, clearly the result of intense battle and violent pursuit."

Li Quan sneered: "Does the Royal Guard Captain have some ulterior motive for saying this?" Lian Anting is obviously a person with extreme restraint. His countenance did not change one bit, even having been openly accused by Li Quan of coveting the Inner City Official position which is one level above his. He said: "Great Prayer Li's words are too serious. This official is but reporting the actual situation to the Empress Dowager. If I deliberately conceal anything, I will lose my job."

Li Yuan laughed and said: "Deliberately distorting the facts not only carries the threat of dismissal, it is also the crime of deceiving the monarch. Great Prayer Li should not overly neglect your form."

Li Quan angrily said: "Left Minister....."

Li Yanyan interrupted him, and turning to the as yet silent Outer City Official Wu Zhan and asked: "Does General Wu have any opinion on this matter?" Wu Zhan controlled the city's defense so he wielded enormous power. His position was at the same level as Dou Jie, but he has always been even-handed and impartial. That is why his words have exceptional influence.

The lion-like Wu Zhan's large eyes, which looked like copper bells, emitted a cold and severe expression and landed on Qu Shiming. He said in a deep voice: "Indiscriminately using the knife and sword within the palace is a big crime. Worse still is murder, which is unforgivable. Nonetheless since Official Qu claims that it is casual fighting and disturbance, we should clarify matters. Empress Dowager only needs to allow me to bring the offenders away to be interrogated separately, I guarantee that the whole truth will be revealed."

The countenance of Li Quan, Dou Jie and the rest changed immediately. Who would have thought that Wu Zhan did not take into account one bit of their feelings and sensibilities. If all this group of background instigators are reveal, it would be an even worse disaster for them.

At this moment, the gate official sang out: "Lord Chunshen arrives!"

Lord Chunshen was followed by a warrior general on each side. One of them is his fifth son Huang Zhan, who rushed into the hall in a torrent.

As they paid their respects, Li Yuan quietly informed Xiang Shaolong that the other person was Lord Chunshen's third son Huang Ba.

Lord Chunshen arrived and stood upstream of Dou Jie and completely

beyond everyone's expectation, pointed his finger and started scolding Qu Shiming severely. He said: "Qu Shiming, you are the Inner Castle Official and are responsible for the security of the palace. Unexpectedly you break the law despite knowing the law, do you admit your crime?"

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan winked at each other, knowing that Lord Chunshen is going to kill them to ensure their silence.

Qu Shiming still thought that Lord Chunshen was going to use another method to exonerate him, and hurriedly replied: "This general accepts his guilt!"

Lord Chunshen faced Li Yanyan and said: "The old official invites Empress Dowager to make an immediate decree, to behead all the offenders."

Qu Shiming started to tremble from head to toe, and raising his head, shouted in shock: "Lord! This matter...."

Huang Zhan hurried out from behind Lord Chunshen and kicked Qu Shiming on the mouth. The latter's teeth were immediately shattered and lips split. With a miserable howl, he tumble down onto the ground.

Lord Chunshen turned his head and glared at the Qu Shiming who was painfully moaning and groaning on the ground and said disdainfully: "You have committed a capital offense and you still dare to insult the Empress Dowager, even ten thousand deaths is not enough to absolve you."

With a few simple words, he has covered over Huang Zhan's act to silence

the prisoner.

Li Yanyan looked at Lord Chunshen coldly, and only after a long while did she let out a sigh and say: "Men! Bring these people out of the palace hall to be hanged immediately. The Royal Guard Captain is responsible for the execution."

Lian Anting knelt to receive the order, and then instructed the guards to take Qu Shiming and the rest out.

Li Quan and the rest were all pale, but knew that this was the best way to solve the problem for them.

Li Yanyan's eyes swept over everyone. When her eyes fell on Xiang Shaolong, she stopped for quite a while, showing a perplexingly complex look, before finally coming to Wu Zhan. She said in a soft voice: "Who does General Wu think should assume the role of Inner City Official?"

Xiang Shaolong had a good feeling about the fierce general Wu Zhan, and was very interested to know his proposal.

Lord Chunshen and gang all displayed a wary look. It would appear that this Inner City Official position has a critical influence on the outcome of the battle between the two factions.

On the contrary, it was Li Yuan who's manner was calm, even revealing a smile.

Wu Zhan solemnly said: "Shouchun is now in troubled times, and even the palace grounds are no exception. This general believes that there should not be any major changes. Let us promote Official Lian up one rank. As for the Royal Guard Captain post, let the Vice Captain Du Gui fill it. Does Empress Dowager think that this is workable?" Before Lord Chunshen and the rest could object, she preempted: "General Wu's suggestion is close to my intention. Let it be done this way. Nobody may object."

The she continued and said: "General Wan has been startled. Please stay behind. Dismissed!"

Li Yanyan was alone waiting for Xiang Shaolong at the back of the hall. After the guards and servant maids had been driven away by her, this absolutely beautiful Empress Dowager let out a rare smile. She faced the Xiang Shaolong who was sitting downward and said: "Is it reasonable to say that General Wan is actually more famous and talented than he is presently."

Xiang Shaolong felt fear creeping into his heart, but pretended not to understand, saying: "What is the meaning of Empress Dowager's words?" Li Yanyan flashed him a glare and said: "The people who wanted to murder you just now were all the most outstanding of the guards. Each of them can handle ten men under normal circumstances. However despite mounting a sneak attack, General Wan managed to kill seven of them while remaining completely unhurt yourself. This caused me to think of one person."

Xiang Shaolong felt a chill down his entire spine and asked: "Who did Empress Dowager think of?" Li Yanyan changed the subject and said: "After meeting General this morning, I went to see Madam Xiu'er's embroidery. She

was perturbed and made one mistake after another, and even pricked her finger. I questioned my men and found out that General and Xiu'er bumped into each other as you were leaving, and that she even arranged for a carriage to send General off. At that time I did not think of anything. But after seeing General's later performance at the Dian King's Mansion and in the palace, I changed my thinking."

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed in alarm, knowing that she had suspicions of him.

Li Yanyan's eyes gleamed and firmly gazed at him, saying: "There is only one man under heaven who can cause Xiu'er to be so distracted after only one encounter. Can General Wan tell me who that man is?" Xiang Shaolong knew he had been exposed. Guo Xiu'er is Li Yanyan's close friend after all, and must share her personal matters often. So when Li Yanyan discovered her strange manner, and with himself also displaying such extraordinary yet furtive conduct together with his formidable talent, this beautiful but intelligent woman was bound to guess that he was Xiang Shaolong.

This time, this pretense of his seems to have suffered setbacks everywhere and is in shambles. It is fortunate that Tian Dan does not yet know he has arrived.

And Li Yanyan also shooed everyone else away before revealing his identity. There must be some leeway for him to turn the situation around.

After heaving a big sigh, he reverted to his former easy and unrestrained manner and dully said: "Did she tell you any of the 'honey stories'?" Li Yanyan

nodded slightly and her face turned dark again, saying: "Xiang Shaolong! How audacious of you. This time are you on orders from Qin to bewitch my Great Chu's vassal states?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "I, Xiang Shaolong am not such a base and despicable person, plus I disdain to do these kind of things. If I want to fight, I will fight on the battlefield to show my real stuff. This time I came to assassinate Tian Dan. Now that my identity has been exposed by Empress Dowager, I have no choice but to return to Qin. The only request is to be able to lead Dian's orphan and widow away peacefully."

Li Yanyan almost losing her voice, said: "Is it so easy to leave?" Xiang Shaolong smiled and looked at her, first flashing around of his handsome sex appeal, then serenely said: "Whether you want to kill or maim, its all at your convenience. But if I am killed, and with Lord Chunshen's plot to send people to kill Xu Xian, even Lu Buwei will find it difficult to prevent the Qin army from crossing the border, leading to a disaster."

Li Yanyan was extremely angry and said: "This is being an intolerable bully. Do you think my Great Chu is really afraid of Qin? Qin is presently facing a revolt in the Eastern regions and is unable to look after itself. Would they really dare to invade my Great Chu?" This speech was hard on the outside but soft on the inside. People with sharp eyes could all tell that she was afraid. It is no wonder. Whose countenance does not change nowadays when talking about Qin?

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Qin is certainly now busy with internal affairs. But what matter is the Eastern uprising? 'Soldiers arrive, calm restored'. 'Medicine arrives, illness cured'. On the contrary, it is Great Chu's

issue with Dian that has caused the vassal states to have a change of mind, inciting popular confusion. Qin may not have the strength to conquer Chu right now, but as long as Qin is able to force Empress Dowager to move her capital once again, the consequences would be indescribable."

As the two of them stared at each other, Li Yanyan coldly said: "Just now you mentioned that Lord Chunshen has sent people to attacked Xu Xian's diplomatic delegation. What is this about?" Xiang Shaolong secretly celebrated, knowing that the tide has turned, and he said with a deep voice: "This is actually a big conspiracy by Tian Dan and Lu Buwei to overturn Chu. Lord Chunshen thinks that killing Xu Xian will put him in Lu Buwei's good books, but in reality he has fallen into a trap."

He then related everything from beginning to end, especially the part about how Lu Buwei and Tian Dan colluded, at first seeming to include Li Yuan, but later showing their true plans, abandoning Li Yuan in favor of Lord Chunshen. He also took the chance to tell her about how he met Madam Zhuang in the Qinling mountains, and even elaborated in detail how Cheng Qi disguised as a boatman to murder them en route.

Li Yanyan's beautiful eyes got bigger and bigger, her countenance flitting between light to dark, appearing extremely shocked.

At last Xiang Shaolong said: "Empress Dowager should know by now that I truly have not the least bit of dishonorable intention towards Great Chu."

Li Yanyan said in annoyance: "Why is Lord Chunshen so muddle-headed, unexpectedly disregarding universal condemnation to murder the Qin

diplomatic delegation that has come to offer condolences. I must prevent this from happening."

Xiang Shaolong said: "If it was possible, I would have done it already. Xu Xian is one of the core people in the Qin military. If something untoward happens and Lu Buwei leaks that it has been perpetrated by Lord Chunshen, then the only way to appease the fury of the Qin military is to offer up the head of Lord Chunshen. Then I could possibly make an attempt at exonerating Great Chu."

Li Yanyan was startled and said: "How can I do such a thing? Ai! Although I am the Empress Dowager, I still do not have the ability to behead Lord Chunshen so easily."

Xiang Shaolong knows that she has already been affected emotionally and softly said: "It can be done as long as Empress Dowager does not oppose it. I will think of a way with Imperial Uncle."

Li Yanyan blankly said: "Does Imperial Uncle know you are Xiang Shaolong?" Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Li Yanyan clearly knew about the former happenings between the two of them and said with a deep voice: "Doesn't he hate you for stealing his love?" Xiang Shaolong said: "At present, Brother Li can only choose between killing me and Chu's internal disorder plus the threat of the Qin army. In the end Brother Li loves his family and his country, and so he chose to collaborate with me!"

Li Yanyan contemplated this for a while then showed a tired look and said extremely tenderly: "General Wan, please withdraw. I need to have a good think."

Her feeble manner caused Xiang Shaolong to be extremely aroused. As he hurriedly suppressed his crooked thoughts, he left.

The moment he stepped out of the palace hall, he was immediately invited by Li Yuan to his alternate residence in the palace for a discussion.

After revealing his exposure by Li Yanyan, Li Yuan happily said: "This matter is wonderful. If younger sister stands on our side, our odds will increase greatly."

Xiang Shaolong purposely tested his sincerity, saying: "Empress Dowager's manner towards both you and Lord Chunshen appears special. Does she have some situation between the two of you?" Li Yuan stared blankly for a while then gave a profound gasp, exposing a painful look, saying: "Even though Brother Xiang has always been this Li's arch enemy, but no matter whether it's me or Tian Dan, we both greatly admire Brother Xiang in our hearts, even finding glory in having a person such as you as our opponent. If this had been asked by someone else, I would have just beaten around the bush and been done with it. But now I do not feel like concealing it from you, and even more am convinced that Brother Xiang will help our Li family preserve this secret."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank, knowing that his expectation was not far off.

Li Yanyan was really involved in an unnatural relationship. Li Yuan was silent

for a long time before slowly saying: "When Yanyan was fourteen, she was already very beautiful. Dad, mom and me this elder brother all regarded her as a precious pearl. We never expected that it was not only outsiders that salivated at her charm, but there were even people within the clan who harbored wild and beastly desires."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock. It seems that he had wrongly guessed the relationship between Li Yuan and Li Yanyan. The incestuous person was someone else. But why then was Li Yanyan's attitude towards Li Yuan so odd?

Li Yuan said: "I do not wish to discuss the details. The matter happened when Yanyan was sixteen. This beast with a human face was Li Quan. Li Ling also had a hand in it. At that time Li Quan was the most powerful in the Li clan. We could only watch in silent fury. Dad and mom passed away in hatred because of this. Yanyan also changed completely, totally unwilling to come into contact with men, hiding in the house all day long. She was only willing to see me this one person and she had an unusual unwillingness to part with me."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly puzzled and asked: "If this is the case, she should be dying to kill Li Quan, why does she then trust him so?" Li Yuan grieved and said: "Because she also hates me!"

Xiang Shaolong looked at him in shock.

Li Yuan slapped his palm on the table and his eyes emitted a blaze of hatred, and gnashing his teeth, he said: "From that moment on, I determined to kill Li

Quan and Li Ling by hook or by crook. Up till when she was twenty, Li Quan this person who is worse than a beast unexpectedly came repeatedly to demand for her. I was at a loss and was compelled to think of a plot, which is to give Yanyan to Lord Chunshen. If she became pregnant, we would have Lord Chunshen give her to the King. Brother Xiang should understand my meaning! Only this way will Li Quan not dare to touch Yanyan. And I could also obtain Lord Chunshen's favor and trust, and also had a chance to become the Imperial Uncle."

Xiang Shaolong stared at Li Yuan in a daze. Who would have thought that the situation would be so complex. Indeed, every family has its problems. At the same time, it could be seen that amongst the different countries, not only did the Chu clans hold the most power, they were also the most incestuous.

Li Yuan said: "I spent ten days expositing to Yanyan before convincing her, and the main reason she agreed was for the good of Chu. This was because if the King had no sons, there would have been chaos after he died. But she had a condition, and that is that the father of this child had to be me. She was only willing to bear a child for me."

Xiang Shaolong's voice almost failed, saying: "What?" Both Li Yuan's eyes turned red and with a depressed look, he unhurriedly said: "I pretended to agree to her request. When it was time to do the deed, I switched with a household warrior whose body shape was similar to mine. Its a pity that a hundred secrets are revealed with one carelessness, and she found out after. She was so angry that she killed the man with her protective dagger. The next day, she did not say a thing and followed me to Lord Chunshen's house. Since then she refused to speak to me. Only after she became Empress Dowager

did she treat me a little better. She deliberately favored Li Quan to harm me. Only recently did I realize that she had an unbalanced mind. That is why I was so happy when I found out that she had taken an interest to you, hoping that she could return to normal."

Xiang Shaolong finally understood why Li Yuan and Li Quan were from the same clan but were crossing swords, and why Li Quan can act so arrogantly with powerful backing. There was actually such an unnatural and perverse relationship behind this.

Taking in a deep breath, he said: "Li Quan and the Empress Dowager, Hei! Do they still have....."

Li Yuan shook his head and said: "Definitely not. Yanyan deeply and painfully hated men after that incident, only willing to talk to me. Later how she managed to bewilder Lord Chunshen and the King until their bodies and souls were reversed, even I do not understand. I do not know why she is able to endure them."

Xiang Shaolong said: "She did it for you. This is the only way to prevent Li Quan from killing you."

Li Yuan's whole body shook dramatically and with one hand grabbing at Xiang Shaolong, said with a gasp: "Is this really so?" Xiang Shaolong said: "It truly is so. That she is willing to ignore her pain and serve the two men is indeed because of revenge. But she knows that you are now Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's adversary, that is why she deliberately became close to Li Quan and distanced herself from you. Just looking at how she allowed you to stay

within the palace, we can see that she intended to protect you."

Li Yuan said: "Then why doesn't she explain everything clearly to me?" Xiang Shaolong said: "That is because she really still hates you. I discovered this subtle circumstance that day when I was secretly looking at the both of you from behind the screen."

After revealing everything, Li Yuan felt a lot more at peace, and nodded saying: "Brother Xiang's words make sense. Brother Xiang should now understand my sincerity in collaborating with you. As long as we are able to kill Lord Chunshen, Li Quan and Li Ling, I don't care about anything else."

At this point even Xiang Shaolong also feels like killing Li Quan and Li Ling these two people who were worse than beasts. He asked: "At this point, who is holding on to military power in Shouchun?" Li Yuan resumed his calm and replied: "Shouchun's troops are mainly divided into the Outer City Guards, the Inner City Guards and the External Defense Army. Originally, the Outer City Guards and the Inner City Guards operate under Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's control. But with Qu Shiming's death, the Inner City Guards are now under the command of Lian Anting. Du Qui has been promoted to become the Royal Guard Captain. These two are both my men. That is why the Inner City Guards are safely in my hands. Who would have thought that Wu Zhan was so helpful."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Which side did Wu Zhan originally belong to?" Li Yuan said: "Wu Zhan is only loyal to the Crown Prince (of Chu) and Yanyan. If we did not have him to maintain the present circumstances, younger sister would have fallen into Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's control long ago. Even I

would not have been able to protect her. The Inner City soldiers number approximately ten thousand. I will completely dismantle the remnants of Qu Shiming's clique. Only by protecting my sister and the Crown Prince (of Chu) do I have the capital to contend with them."

After a pause, he continued: "The Outer City soldiers number about thirty thousand and are responsible for the defense of the city and the four neighboring towns. The commander of the External Defense Army is precisely the ingrate Dou Jie. In those days, it was I who vigorously pushed for him to assume this key position. How would I know that when I returned from Handan, he had already thrown his lot in with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan. The External Defense Army is responsible for land and naval defense and also for building the Great Wall. Their soldiers number fifty thousand, and they have the greatest strength, if not I would have gotten rid of Li Quan long ago.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "How about Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's private strength?" Li Yuan said: "Li Quan is nothing to fear. But Lord Chunshen's three sons Huang Zhan, Huang Hu and Huang Ba are dauntless and unrivaled military leaders, together with five thousand household warriors, nobody in Shouchun is more powerful than he is. I only have two thousand family warriors under me. We are not even comparable."

Xiang Shaolong said: "Now that Huang Hu has led three thousand men to murder Xu Xian, his strength is greatly reduced, so if we want to make a move it has to be within these few days. Else once Huang Hu is back, Lord Chunshen will immediately deal with us."

Li Yuan heaved a sigh and said: "I have also considered this point, but once the Yelang King and Li Ling arrive, the entire situation would be different. They have close to two thousand men with them, including many experts. It seems that if the Dian King's Mansion wasn't guarded by the Royal Guards, and if Lord Chunshen didn't need to be so discreet with sister, Li Ling would have led men to invade the Dian King's Mansion long ago. Brother Xiang should also be careful."

Xiang Shaolong felt a big headache and asked: "Is it possible to win over Wu Zhan?" Li Yuan replied: "I won't say that is impossible just yet. If Wu Zhan really stands on our side, it will turn the covert struggle into an open fight, it will only bring us harm and no gain. The best method is still to use a heavy and lightning fast strike to sweep away Lord Chunshen, Li Quan, Li Ling, Dou Jie and the rest, and then let sister clean up the pieces. I only regret that we do not have the strength to do this at present."

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and said: "The one who strikes first gains the initiative. The one who strikes after is dominated. Is Brother Li able to create a map of the Yelang King's Mansion for me? If feasible, I will go and kill Li Ling tonight in order to avoid complications from too much delay."

Li Yuan patted his shoulder and said: "This is easy. Brother Xiang should first return to the dian King's Mansion. I will come look for you in a little while!"

As both men exited the side room door, they coincidentally ran into Guo Xiu'er. All three were startled at the same time.

Li Yuan still does not know that Guo Xiu'er has also seen through Xiang

Shaolong's identity, and laughed, saying: "Xiu're, quickly come and pay your respects to General Wan. He is the Dian Princess's younger brother."

Guo Xiu'er did not dare to look at Xiang Shaolong and greeted him with her head bowed.

All sorts of feelings welled up in Xiang Shaolong's heart, and after a few polite sentences, he went back to the Dian King's Mansion under the escort of Li Yuan's men.

On the way, Guo Xiu'er's pretty and refined face flashed repeatedly in Xiang Shaolong's heart. Unexpectedly, after a few meetings in Handan, she kept him constantly in her mind.

The things that have happened after they reached Shouchun have completely exceeded their expectations. All he wanted to do originally was to kill Tian Dan and then leave Shouchun for Dian to fulfill his commitment to help the Madam Zhuang restore her country.

How was he to know that his identity would be exposed individually and at different times by Guo Xiu'er, Li Yuan and Li Yanyan, and deeply dragged into the Chu capital Shouchun's power struggle.

One of the reasons he is sincere about helping Li Yuan is to help Guo Xiu'er.

This is because if Li Yuan collapses off the stage, Guo Xiu'er will suffer a miserable fate.

The other reason is the debt of righteousness. Li Quan and Li Ling these two men who are lower than beasts are really too vile. As for Lord Chunshen, putting aside the matter of Zhao, just his plot to murder Xu Xian is unforgivable.

The problem is that even with Li Yuan's men, they do not have the strength to deal with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan.

The only way is to compel Li Yanyan to stand on their side. Only by killing Li Ling and demonstrating their power can they sway her opinion.

He just couldn't believe that Li Yanyan wouldn't want to take revenge for the lifetime of disgrace and hatred that changed her entire character.

If not she would not have defended Li Yuan and the Zhuang family constantly in all areas.

By the time he arrived at this thought, he had reached the Dian King's Mansion.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and determined to assassinate Li Ling at the Yelang King's Mansion that night. If not, he might never get another chance.

Chapter 06

A Tragic Life

The moment he stepped into the Mansion, Jing Shan welcomed him and reported: "Master Teng is here!"

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed at the unexpected good news and burst into the inner hall. Teng Yi was chatting with the two ladies Ji and Zhao.

Teng Yi jumped up with unbridled emotions and hugged him tightly.

After they sat down, Ji Yanran beamed: "It turns out that we just missed Second Brother. Dan Quan and Wu Da took only two days on horseback to reach Second Brother Teng."

Teng Yi related: "We attacked Dan Chu's army seven times in succession, but was repelled each time. This person's strategic and tactical acumen is not to be belittled. Pu Bu and Xu Yiluan are now holding them back. I feared that Third Brother was short of men and therefore brought three hundred with me. They all disguised themselves as traders from the Wei border and entered the city in batches. They are the best of our elite special forces."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and said: "I was just fretting over how I would assassinate Li Ling, but now my worries are over. Second Brother should first select ten men and have them act as the Dian King's former subordinates who have come to look for their new Master. These men will take over the

defense of the Dian King's Mansion."

Teng Yi promptly summoned Jing Shan and the recently-arrived Wu Da and Dan Quan and had them take care of the arrangements. Xiang Shaolong then proceeded to brief Teng Yi on all that had happened to that point. As Teng Yi found out that their arch enemy Li Yuan had become their comrade-in-arms, he could not help but bug his eyes in surprise. When Xiang Shaolong revealed that his cover had been blown by Li Yanyan, Zhao Zhi was so startled that she clung onto Ji Yanran's back.

Li Yuan arrived at this moment.

The three men retreated to the study room to strategise.

Li Yuan was energized and his confidence increased when he saw the reinforcements, especially since he knew that a mere two hundred of the Wu family's elite warriors had the power to overcome a thousand regular soldiers.

As they unfolded the map and began discussing their strategy, Lord Chunshen's messenger arrived with an invitation for Madam Zhuang, Zhuang Baoyi and Wan Ruiguang to attend a banquet at his residence.

The three of them furrowed their brows. Li Yuan dispatched a servant back to his house to see if he too been invited. He then said: "What a treacherous banquet. How should we deal with this?"

Xiang Shaolong asserted: "I am sure that Brother Li has also been invited.

Lord Chunshen must have lost his patience after failing to assassinate me today, not to mention that Brother Li's power has surged with the demise of Qu Shiming. He intends to eliminate the both of us in one fell swoop."

Teng Yi grinned: "Then we should beat Lord Chunshen at his own game and eliminate him tonight."

Li Yuan noticed his casual demeanor and smiled saying: "But we cannot possibly bring several hundred men to the feast. It would also be unseemly if we refused to go. We have managed to maintain a veneer of civility up till now."

Xiang Shaolong opined: "We definitely need to attend this banquet. It will cover our sneak attack on the Yelang King's Mansion. How many true experts does Brother Li have under him? They must be near the level of Yan Fu or Dong Luzi."

Li Yuan replied: "I can count on ten to twelve people."

Xiang Shaolong continued: "That is enough. I will add twelve of my men to yours. We will each bring twenty-four men. In addition, Brother Li should station men inside the mansion grounds to keep watch. They are to assault Lord Chunshen's residence the moment they see a signal rocket. We will fight a life and death battle with them."

Teng Yi queried: "Shouldn't we defend against a possible sneak attack by Li Ling's men on the Dian King's Mansion?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "What we actually fear is that he doesn't come! Here..... Hei! We'll have Yanran take charge. They will come but will not be able to leave because they underestimate our strength."

Teng Yi proposed: "I will take care of Li Ling's petty life. In my view, forty-eight people is still a little thin. It would be best to have another ten men look after the horses and carriages outside. If anything happens, everyone will meet outside. This will reduce our risks significantly." Next he patted his sleeve and added: "Our concealed "collapsible crossbows" will decide our victory."

This moment, Lou Wuxin came to report that Li Yuan had indeed received Lord Chunshen's invitation for the night's banquet.

The three men continued to discuss the details of the night's operation. Li Yuan also sought clarity on the "collapsible crossbow"'s function and usage before leaving together with Teng Yi.

Xiang Shaolong then went to look for Madam Zhuang. As he reached Madam Zhuang's Northern courtyard, Zhuang Kong came out to welcome him, saying: "Madam Qingxiu is in the inner hall reminiscing with Madam Zhuang." Before he had finished speaking, the sound of jingling ornaments drifted over. With two servant girls opening the way, Madam Zhuang and another beautiful woman exited side by side. He could't make out Madam Qingxiu's appearance under her veil, but just with her slender build and her elegant footsteps, he could tell that she was a rare beauty. Dou Jie was actually very blessed. Why would he forsake her and fall for Cheng Suning's concubine only to regret after?

Xiang Shaolong and Zhuang Kong briskly stepped aside while expressing their greetings.

Madam Zhuang introduced: "Madam! This is my younger brother Wan Ruiguang." Madam Qingxiu flashed Xiang Shaolong a glance through her veil and returning the courtesy, said: "General Wan, pleased to meet you!"

She did not utter another word but continued to walking and left accompanied by Madam Zhuang. Xiang Shaolong remained unperturbed despite her disregard. After all, no man could possibly expect every woman to fall for him. (I'm sure the ladies on this forum will have a field day with this comment)

After Madam Zhuang returned, she dragged Xiang Shaolong into the inner hall and closed the door behind them. With a heavy expression, she said: "Madam Qingxiu came to warn me that Lord Chunshen, Li Quan, Dou Jie, Cheng Suning, Li Ling and the Yelang King have made a pact to kill us and Li Yuan. Let us leave this minute!"

Xiang Shaolong knitted his eyebrows and queried: "Hasn't she separated from Dou Jie? How would she know about this matter?" Madam Zhuang replied: "Her niece is Huang Zhan's wife. Huang Zhan has a loose tongue. He was raining curses on you and Li Yuan at his home and so leaked the secret."

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand, embraced the gloomy Madam Zhuang and chuckled, saying: "Even if they did not make a move, I would have compelled them to." He then outlined the situation regarding themselves and the enemy.

Madam Zhuang took in a deep breath and said "I see you already knew. In that case, should Baoyi and I go to the banquet tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Of course not. I'll just make up some excuse for Lord Chunshen. I am sure that he has already predicted this."

Madam Zhuang anxiously asked: "Are we at a big disadvantage manpower-wise?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "We may have a lot less people than they do, but combat power is another matter. My people are all trained in infiltration and guerrilla tactics. Once the Yelang King's Mansion is on fire, I can guarantee that Lord Chunshen and his party will be in chaos and won't know what to do. I am determined to lay down my cards with Lord Chunshen tonight. It would be a dream come true if I could seize this golden opportunity to kill Tian Dan at the same time."

Madam Zhuang snuggled into his embrace and said: "Shaolong! I am very thankful to you. But what does it mean to 'lay down my cards'?"

Xiang Shaolong explained and then continued: "I am only afraid that Lord Chunshen's real objective tonight is the two of you mother and son. It would then be difficult for us to strike because we would not have the excuse to use force. Our only consolation then is to kill Li Ling and the Yelang King."

Madam Zhuang giggled: "You're awfully relaxed. Li Ling and the Yelang King have many experts at their sides. Don't underestimate them!"

Xiang Shaolong saw that her bright and intelligent eyes were extremely alluring and leaned over to give her a kiss. He then boasted: "What experts haven't I seen before? The most formidable strategy is to catch the enemies unawares. Their attention should be focused on Li Yuan's family warriors. How would they know I have soldiers in ambush? Knowing oneself but not knowing the opponent, this is a military commander's biggest fear. Madam please do not worry."

Madam Zhuang replied: "We mother and son have Xiang Shaolong to rely on, what do we have to fear? We are just concerned about you."

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was lovely and touching, and couldn't help giving her another heartfelt kiss before leaving to continue his preparations. Who could have guessed that they would be confronting the enemy openly so soon.

Seventy-two members of the elite special forces have arrived. They all infiltrated the Dian King's Mansion secretly by climbing walls and traversing trees.

Ji Yanran was excited with her heavy responsibilities, but was calm and collected in command. She first gathered Madam Zhuang and the women and children and then laid out a defense plan for each strategic position. Even the treetops were covered. Zhao Zhi naturally became her attendant and orderly (OC runner!).

At this moment Lou Wuxin came on Li Yuan's instruction to update Xiang Shaolong on the situation: "Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's informants have

spread out across the city. They have established tight surveillance of the Ministers' residences and the Dian King's Mansion with the intent of preventing anyone from escaping. Instead, it is the Yelang King's Mansion that is undisturbed, with the doors shut and nobody going in and out. No unusual movements can be detected."

Xiang Shaolong pointed out: "'Nobody going in and out' is unusual. This is also known as 'covering intentions makes one conspicuous'. They will definitely attack the Dian King's Mansion tonight. Only by borrowing a foreigner's hand can Lord Chunshen deny all responsibility in front of the Empress Dowager."

Lou Wuxin said: "Our informant in Lord Chunshen's residence says that there will not be any special attack tonight. Huang Zhan has nonetheless been boasting that he will compel you to fight him during the banquet and even said that he is aching to kill you. All my brothers and I are waiting for a good show tonight!" He then continued in a deep voice: "Huang Zhan is the best swordsman in Lord Chunshen's household. Killing him would be a big blow to Lord Chunshen."

Xiang Shaolong unenthusiastically said: "It is enough to cripple him or injure him seriously."

Lou Wuxin chortled and said: "Working for Master Xiang is certainly different." As he was going to continue, Jing Shan came to report: "The Empress Dowager has summoned Xiang Shaolong to the palace."

Xiang Shaolong was elated. Li Yanyan has finally been convinced.

The palace maid withdrew after reporting his name. Li Yanyan had her face behind a veil and was silent. Xiang Shaolong, who was seated on her right, could only wallow in his own boredom.

This was a hall in a quiet and secluded courtyard in the Empress Dowager's palace. With the courtyard entrance closed, there was no trace of any other people. It almost seemed like they were the only two people in the whole universe. He could not help but pity Li Yanyan, recalling her humiliation at puberty, and now with a strained relationship with her brother and with Chu's turbulence, and finally having to put up a pretense with the enemy.

Even though she is now the Empress Dowager, there is no happiness in her life. One can feel her misery and pain just thinking about how she had to bend herself to serve Lord Chunshen and King Xiaolie these two decrepit old men. Now even with that in the past, she has to contend with powerful officials who conspire amongst themselves, borrowing the late King's name to force this weak woman to commit acts against her conscience. Thinking about this, he could not help but sigh deeply.

Li Yanyan coldly asked: "Why is Mister sighing?" Xiang Shaolong could hear the wariness in her voice. He knew that her bitter experiences have made her particularly sensitive and so he could not deal with her like he did others. He softly said: "I don't usually meditate and listen to my surroundings, but I just noticed the sound of wind rustling the leaves in the courtyard. I found that it was constantly changing with infinite variations, pleasant to the ear like the sound of nature, something that I normally miss. I was awakened to the fact that beautiful (good) things are always around us, but because we're engrossed with other things, we will miss them even if they're right in front

of us."

Li Yanyan remained silent but her delicate body trembled lightly. Nonetheless her face was hidden by the veil so Xiang Shaolong couldn't see her reaction. A long while later, Li Yanyan whispered: "Imperial Uncle is my half-brother. We have the same father but different mothers. My father only had us two children. From the moment I was born, Imperial Uncle had always been very protective of me. I..... I remember when I was fourteen, we were attending a Li clan banquet. The Li Ling, who was then called the Li clan's Little Hegemon, ganged up with some others and took liberties with me. Elder Brother defended me and fought with them, one against more than ten. He was beaten black and blue, but steadfastly resisted. Only when the adults were alerted did they stop. He did not awaken until I had tended his injuries for seven days and seven nights."

Xiang Shaolong imagined their bitterness and hardship, and couldn't help praising their fortitude. He could also see that their "sibling love and devotion" had its clear origins, and that their later tragedies had been seeded way back then. Li Yanyan continued as if she was in a dream: "Everyone in the Li clan looked down on my dad, leading us brother and sister to be bullied frequently. Thankfully Elder Brother was never discouraged, arising before dawn everyday to train his sword skills, train his horsemanship and archery, and to read widely and all manner of books. In my heart, there was nobody better than him in the sword, and even less men more erudite and multi-talented than he was. "

Xiang Shaolong knew that she had just made a life-changing decision. She was actually raising all this to convince herself that it was the right decision.

Even though it seemed as if she was speaking to Xiang Shaolong, she was actually repeating everything to herself. Li Yanyan gently let out a breath of air, causing her veil to flutter open a little. She continued gently: "Do you know why I am saying all these things to you?" Xiang Shaolong replied as gently: "Because Empress Dowager trusts that I, Xiang Shaolong, am not some despicable and petty cad who will reveal your secrets in gossip."

Li Yanyan said unhurriedly: "This is one reason. When Elder Brother came back from Handan he was dejected and depressed. I found out later from Guo Xiu'er that it was because he had lost to Dong Horse Fanatic. After I had ascertained the facts, I sent people to investigate the real Dong Horse Fanatic, only to find out that Elder Brother had really been duped by you. It was only after Elder Brother returned from Xianyang this time that I confirmed my conjecture, and informed Xiu'er. (and that is how Xiu'er knew in the end. Didn't someone ask this question?) At that time I was very curious what kind of person Xiang Shaolong was. How was it that with only a trivial few hundred people, you were able to toy with world-class formidable people like Elder Brother and Tian Dan, and defeat them with them not even knowing how and why. Even people like Lu Buwei who had power to overturn the Qin court could not cope with you. I finally understand today."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said: "I was just lucky a few times!"

Li Yanyan bowed her head and very lightly said: "Can you sit beside me?" Xiang Shaolong tarried for a while before approaching her and sitting three feet from her on the right. Li Yanyan lowered her head and removed her veil, then looked up again. Only then did Xiang Shaolong realize that her beautiful face was covered in hot tears.

Xiang Shaolong's own emotions surged, and he exclaimed hoarsely: "Empress Dowager!"

Li Yanyan closed her eyes but her tears continued to stream down unbidden. Her voice continued to be calm, however, and she continued one word at a time: "Xiang Shaolong! Kill Li Quan, Li Ling and Lord Chunshen for me. They are all lower than beasts."

Xiang Shaolong replied in grief and determination: "Shaolong solemnly obeys Empress Dowager's decree!"

Li Yanyan opened her graceful eyes gradually. Her lovely yet pitiful expression looked like pear blossoms in the rain, causing Xiang Shaolong to lower his guard. He reached out his sleeve instinctively and gently wiped away the pearly teardrops that clung to her powdered face. Li Yanyan gave him free reign and did not move, seeming as if she did not notice.

As Xiang Shaolong drew back his sleeve, he said solemnly: "Empress Dowager may relax. I will protect Imperial Uncle from any harm."

He couldn't help laughing at how preposterous the situation was. Those days in Handan, Li Yuan was one of the men he most wanted to kill. How could one imagine that he would now wholeheartedly battle side-by-side with him.

Li Yanyan's gentle eyes focused on his face. She said with her calm and clearly: "Wu Zhan just reported that Dou Jie has made an unauthorized troop movement. A full division of soldiers have come upstream from the Huai River and are within ten miles of the city. What's more, a fleet of twenty

warships have been parked right beside Shouchun. This is clearly a threat to caution me against dealing with them. I have no choice but to endure this bitterly. If I did not have Wu Zhan maintaining the equilibrium, Elder Brother and I would have been finished long ago. Yet Elder Brother is still unaware of my difficulties."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Besieging troops need to be double the size of the defending troops to present any threat. Attacking one's own royal city, and even more so if there is no legitimate cause, the army will be fragmented and disunited. Dou Jie appears strong, but he is actually weak. Empress Dowager does not have to worry about this."

Li Yanyan flashed him a look of mild annoyance and said: "It is easy for you to say. I fear that the situation in the inner city is unstable, and the Outer City Guards have also been fully deployed for external defense. The Royal Guards have also been pulled back to protect the palace. If Lord Chunshen and his gang strike first and attack you, what should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong guffawed and, displaying an unmatched confidence, leisurely said: "Soldiers are valued for their proficiency, not their numbers. It is Li Quan and Li Ling and that 'distinguished' bunch who should be worried."

Li Yanyan gazed at him with steely eyes and said: "Xiang Shaolong! Have more of your men infiltrated Shouchun?" Xiang Shaolong chuckled and said: "Empress Dowager, please forgive me for revealing the climax prematurely. By daybreak, Li Ling's spirit would have departed his body. Take it as a modicum of justice for the Empress Dowager."

Li Yanyan's body trembled dramatically and with an uptight voice, she said: "Did Elder Brother reveal my story? Why else would you say such a thing?"

Xiang Shaolong was not prepared for her sensitivity. Alarmed, he quickly tried to explain himself, saying: "Didn't Empress Dowager mention that Li Ling bullied the two of you, and even beat your Elder Brother so badly that he was unconscious for seven days and nights?"

Li Yanyan's upright posture was beginning to give way to the increasingly urgent heaves wrecking her body. Tears once again brimmed in her eyes as she stared blankly at Xiang Shaolong. All of a sudden, with a "Hua" sound, she started bawling and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's bosom.

Xiang Shaolong gently held her violently convulsing body, feeling the moist patch on his shoulder growing bigger and bigger. He felt her pain, knowing that her long suppressed grief and bitterness had finally burst through her restraint. He did not speak a word of comfort, but cradled her as if she was an infant. Of course there was no hint of eroticism in this.

His noble and sentimental heart was bursting with sympathy and tenderness towards her. At this point, he only wished that he could console this weak suffering woman who has had to display such a strong and unyielding front.

A long while later, Li Yanyan finally choked back her tears. With his help, she sat her lovely body up straight and wiped away her tears. With her head lowered daintily, she lightly said: "I shall await your good news tonight."

Xiang Shaolong stood up without a word and left quietly. His entire shoulder was drenched with her tears.

Chapter 07

The Treacherous Banquet

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan left a little earlier and met on a side street to exchange updates.

The two of them ensconced themselves in a horse carriage. Li Yuan asked: "What did Empress Dowager want of you?"

Xiang Shaolong warily peered out the window, and casually said: "Empress Dowager wanted me to kill Li Quan, Li Ling and Lord Chunshen."

Li Yuan's spirits rose, saying: "Did she really say that?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and said: "Why would I lie to you? Why does she hate Lord Chunshen so?"

Li Yuan sighed forlornly and said: "She hates all men who have sullied her body. This includes King Xiaolie."

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Any updates on your end?"

Li Yuan replied: "It appears that Lord Chunshen merely intends to use a duel to deal damage to us. This is because the guests tonight include all the senior officials, foreign dignitaries and even some vassal lords themselves. No matter how reckless Lord Chunshen and Li Quan are, they will not dare to

attack us openly with their hundreds of people."

Xiang Shaolong asked somberly: "Is the Yelang King in the guest list?"

Li Yuan replied: "I did not see his name. This does not mean he won't be there though. Lord Chunshen must know how easy it is for me get a copy of his guest list."

Xiang Shaolong said in a deadpan: "I intend to determine victory or defeat with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan at this banquet. We will not get another chance. If I am not mistaken, Lord Chunshun will rise in revolt tomorrow morning when Dou Jie's troops are in position. Attacking from within and without, they will use overwhelming force to subdue Shouchun. The Inner City Guards falling into your hands was a bitter blow to them. This banquet is meant to detain us along with the most influential people in Shouchun. Cut off from the outside, we will not be able to make any countervailing moves. This gives them great tactical advantage."

Li Yuan frantically said: "But Lord Chunshen has three thousand family warriors while we have a mere sixty men. Worse, some of our men will be left out in the front lawn. If we start fighting, we would be lucky to escape with our lives. How would we be able to kill the enemy?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "To shoot a person first shoot the horse. To catch the thieves first catch the king (ringleader). Has Brother Li heard of these two sayings?"

Li Yuan repeated the words twice to himself before his eyes gleamed,

demonstrating his understanding.

Xiang Shaolong said: "I almost forgot the crucial point. Is Tian Dan on the guest list?"

Li Yuan shook his head and said: "I was just coming to this. Tian Dan has vanished after having breakfast with Lord Chunshen this morning. I think he may have slipped away from Shouchun."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. He said vexedly: "If he did leave, he should have been spotted by the city guards. Why haven't you received any news?"

Li Yuan said in exasperation: "With Dou Jie making the arrangements, even Wu Zhan would have found it hard to investigate. It is a simple matter for them to sneak Tian Dan out of Shouchun under cover."

Xiang Shaolong said with determination: "With this, it is even more important for us to make a move. The only way we can determine Tian Dan's whereabouts is to force it out of Lord Chunshen."

Li Yuan understood his intent. If Tian Dan is already on his way to Qi, Xiang Shaolong would need to settle the matter with Lord Chunshen as quickly as possible and then double up to give chase.

Heaving a sigh, he said: "Brother Xiang has neglected his own matters because of me. I am embarrassed. Ai! That said, our chances tonight are actually not high!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled while shaking his head, saying: "Know yourself and know your enemy, a hundred battles without defeat. I have another proposal. Brother Li might as well substitute all his personal guards for my men. As long as Lord Chunshen does not know that we are carrying crossbows, our chances will increase to seventy percent. This is known as lengthening oneself to shorten the enemy. Using the crossbow to defeat the sword; avoiding their strengths and attacking their weaknesses, using efficiency and speed to defeat the enemy's strength in numbers."

Li Yuan exclaimed: "Even if Sun Wu were to come back to life, he would find it difficult to defeat Brother Xiang's clever stratagems."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled in his heart. This is precisely the creed of the special forces, using the elite to defeat the ordinary. As long as they could grasp the enemy's weakest link, it would be like pinching a viper's throat. No matter how formidable the enemy was, it could only submit and be captured.

After the two of them split up, Li Yuan entered the palace to report everything to Li Yanyan while Xiang Shaolong made his way to Lord Chunshen's banquet.

Entering the main gate, he reached the lawn of the residence which was large enough for a thousand drilling soldiers. It was presently filled with horses and carriages. The whole area was brightly lit.

The main residence was on built on a white stone terrace. It was surrounded by covered walkways which were connected to buildings on the left and right as well as the rear. The environment was elegant and refined, with ancient

trees reaching to the skies.

Xiang Shaolong's heart was stirred.

The status of the Chu King with his subjects was clearly lower than that of the Qin King.

That year in the period before King Zhuangxiang's funeral, all forms of celebrations and festivities in Xianyang ceased. The people here were completely different. Just with this one observation, one could tell why Qin was always victorious over Chu.

Xiang Shaolong and his men dismounted. Six of the men were assigned to watch over the horses while the other twenty-four followed him towards the main residence.

It was common for big shots to bring ten family warriors to banquets. Twenty-four is on the high side, but under the present circumstances, Lord Chunshun had no reason to object. Moreover, how could he be concerned with twenty-four men?

The steps leading up to the main residence were filled with Lord Chunshun's family warriors. Lord Chunshun was with his two sons Huang Zhan and Huang Ba welcoming the guests.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards the steps. When he was halfway there, a voice called out from behind him: "Ah! Please hold it!"

Xiang Shaolong halted in alarm and turned his head. Scrutinizing the face of the person who was hurrying up to him, he was surprised again.

It was Han Chuang. He had a puzzled look on his face, and he apologized with a dry cough: "My apologies, I mistook you for someone else."

It was obvious that Han Chuang had recognized him from his back profile, but could not be sure after seeing his face since his entire appearance had been greatly altered.

Xiang Shaolong chuckled and said: "Your servant is now Wan Ruiguang! How is Marquis?"

Han Chuang understood instantly and winked at him. He then turned around to greet the other dignitaries.

Xiang Shaolong felt warmth in his heart. This Han Chuang may be flawed, but he was true to his friends.

As he walked up the stone steps, the two-faced Lord Chunshen hastened over and greeted him, saying: "Welcome General Wan! This lord is extremely honored. Why isn't the Dian Princess and the little Crown Prince (of Dian) here?"

Xiang Shaolong observed the formalities, returned the greeting and said apologetically: "The little majesty is unwell. The Dian Princess has remained behind to look after him. Will the Lord please forgive me."

Lord Chunshen hurriedly said: "I'll dispatch people immediately to diagnose and treat the little Crown Prince (of Dian). Once the precious medicine arrives, the ailment will be cured."

Xiang Shaolong swept his eyes over Huang Zhan, Huang Ba and family warriors who were all glaring fiercely at him. He chuckled in his heart and thought, no matter how sharp your eyes are, you can never imagine that there is such a thing as a "collapsible crossbow" that can be hidden in one's trouser legs. This the advantage of 'High Technology'.

He replied: "I appreciate the Lord's good intentions. The little majesty has just taken his medicine. If he is not better tomorrow, we'll trouble the lord to look into it!"

At that point, a family warrior led Xiang Shaolong into the large hall.

The hall was comparable to the King's palace hall. There were four immense wooden pillars on each side, holding up four majestic beams which in turn supported roof.

The host seat was on the Southern end facing the entrance. Three rows of banquet mats extended to the left and right. Roughly estimating, there were at least a hundred seats in all. The front row of mats were for the important guests while the row at the back of the room was set up for family warriors and followers.

At this point, more than half the guests had been seated. They were served by more than a hundred colorfully dressed servant girls who looked like

butterflies. The atmosphere was lively and celebratory.

Xiang Shaolong glimpsed the Guo Kai whom he had not seen in a long time seated to the left of the host seat. After he had become the Premier in Zhao, this lord seemed to have been reborn, filled with spirit and vigor and being as pleased as punch. He was presently chatting with Lord Longyang who was seated beside him.

This moment, the ushering family warrior said: "Master Wan, please!"

Xiang Shaolong followed him to the fourth mat to the right of the host seat.

Jing Shan and the rest squeezed into the two mats behind him and sat down in orderly rows.

Lord Longyang who was reclined opposite him gave him a wink. Guo Kai looked over and sized him up, but evidently did not recognize him as Xiang Shaolong.

The hall was now noisy with a feel of excitement. The guests were all taking advantage of the time before the start of the banquet to greet each other and exchange news. Nonetheless nobody seemed to show an interest in Xiang Shaolong. Only the envoys from the vassal states waved at him in greeting.

A servant girl approached to serve wine.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at her and noticed that she was extremely dark.

She even had a small mole on her left cheek. Since her appearance was commonplace, he took no further interest. He turned to scrutinize the other guests.

Li Quan was just across from him. After giving him a disdainful glance, he continued talking to the Cheng Suning who was downwards of him. He did not give Xiang Shaolong a further glance, as if he was already a dead man that would no longer have any effect on him.

As Xiang Shaolong was sneering in his heart, a familiar sweet-sounding voice wafted into his ears, saying: "You devil! Once again dressing up to scam people."

Xiang Shaolong's body shook with epic excitement and he almost called out Shan Rou's name. As he was about to take a closer look at the servant girl in front of him, Shan Rou softly scolded him: "Don't look at me. There is a concealed exit to your rear which connects to the outside through a winding corridor. Be careful!"

She left once she finished speaking.

Seeing this dream stealing and soul bewitching female confidante again, Xiang Shaolong's spirits surged. The whole world was now alive to him, filled with colour and warmth that he had thirsted for and waited for expectantly for a long time.

At the same time, he was alarmed.

From appearances, this large hall only had two side doors leading to narrow corridors connected to the side courtyards. Without Shan Rou's information, he wouldn't have known that there was a concealed exit at the rear. This was a formidable arrangement for Lord Chunshen. He almost wanted to go in to take a look.

He hurriedly waved Jing Shan over and told him the matter.

As Jing Shan retreated, Xiang Shaolong's heart filled with the beautiful image of Shan Rou.

This beauty was certainly versatile and capable, actually managing to infiltrate Lord Chunshen's household as a servant girl to for an opportunity to kill Tian Dan.

At this moment, Shan Rou came back serving food. She whispered: "There are lances hidden underneath the corridors outside." She then turned away to serve another guest.

Xiang Shaolong let go of his worries. It appeared that the opponent did not dare to use crossbows for fear of missing the target and hitting the other guests instead.

At this point, the guests had mostly arrived. Xiang Shaolong failed to recognize most of the guests being announced by the entrance official. He just knew that they were either rulers themselves or top ministers, an exceedingly distinguished crowd.

The four military commanders Dou Jie, Wu Zhan, Lian Anting and Du Gui were all absent. This was expected since even though Shouchun looked peaceful on the outside, it was wrecked with tension on the inside. Dou Jie's big army was now confronting both the Inner and Outer City Guards. It was presently a stalemate.

Qu Shiming's failed attack on Xiang Shaolong had given Lord Chunshen and Li Quan their largest setback. With the Inner City Guards falling under Li Yanyan and Li Yuan's control, the enemy was compelled to distract them with the present threat of danger.

This moment, the entrance official chanted: "The Qielan King arrives!"

Xiang Shaolong looked over at the entrance. The first thing he saw was the sheen of jade arms and beautiful legs.

Their owner was a youth filled with feral beauty and sex appeal.

This girl was dressed in clothes made from thin leather. Her beautiful hair hung to her eyebrows, and she had a smooth chest and bare arms. She was extremely alluring.

The most captivating thing was that as she looked around, she flashed her abundantly sweet smile and coquettish eyes, instantly grabbing everyone's attention.

With great difficulty, Xiang Shaolong forced his attention to the Qielan King beside her. His head was crowned with a feathered crest and he wore a long

robe. He was short and stout, with his facial features squeezed into the center of his face. He walked with an exaggerated swagger and was talking to the Lord Chunshen at his side.

All the bodyguards behind him were taller by at least half a head, their exposed arms thick and strong, creating a unique ethnic appearance.

As Lord Chunshen pointed him to his seat, Xiang Shaolong suspected that the Qielan King was asking after himself. Indeed the Qielan King's slender eyes looked over in his direction. Extricating himself from Lord Chunshen, he led his delegation over in large strides and sat down.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up to offer his greetings.

The Qielan King then laughed loudly from a distance: "Wan Ruiguang is worthy of being named the number one warrior of Southern Dian. Just arriving at Shouchun, you drove away the scoundrel who had the gall to occupy the Dian King's Mansion, to everyone's great satisfaction."

The other guests all pricked their ears and raised their brows at this open declaration of support.

Li Quan snorted loudly, expressing his dissatisfaction.

The Qielan King either did not hear or pretended not to. Without waiting for anyone, he came to the front row and raised his right palm.

Xiang Shaolong had been instructed by Madam Zhuang earlier, and hurriedly

raised his right palm and hi-fived him three times.

The Qielan King said to that captivating girl: "Caicai, come meet Hero Wan, Ha! This is my daughter Nuo Caicai. I brought her here this time to see the Great Chu's bustling scene."

Nuo Caicai greeted, her soul stealing eyes sending him an unforgettable ripple, and giggled before saying: "General Wan is really big and strong!"

These words instantly caused a murmur to break out. It was rare to see such a brazen and unrestrained girl being so forward with a man she had just met.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen hurried up and was about to lead the him to a mat on the right of the host seat when the Qielan King pointed to the mat ahead of Xiang Shaolong's and said: "I will take my seat here."

A look of displeasure flashed across Lord Chunshen's eyes, but he could not object.

Just as the bustle was resuming, the entrance official proclaimed: "The Yelang King arrives!"

The Qielan King leaned to one side with complete disregard to his bearing and spat out a glob of spittle with a "Pei" sound, expressing his distaste at hearing the Yelang King's name. He then led the scorchingly hot Qielan Princess Nuo Caicai to the mat upwards of Xiang Shaolong, openly proclaiming that he was standing in unity with the Wan Ruiguang that Xiang Shaolong was playing.

Dispensing with propriety, he gave him several winks.

After the song courtesans had retreated, the Yelang King bellowed a long laugh, looked at Xiang Shaolong with his ferocious eyes, and raised his cup, saying: "I'll first toast General Wan a cup, then inquire on one matter. General Wan, please advise."

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a glance with Li Yuan, both knowing that the show was about to start. Nonetheless, they would let the enemy make the first move.

Chapter 08

Fight Behind Closed Doors

Xiang Shaolong did not make a move, and solemnly shouted: "I, Wan Ruiguang have never drank wine with my enemies. This toast can be dispensed with. Whatever matter the vassal lord has, please raise it!"

The whole banquets hall quietened down. Everyone could feel the mutual hostility.

The Qielan King gave a cold snort and glared furiously at the Yelang King.

As host, Lord Chunshen should have raised his voice to diffuse the situation, but he took it easy and looked on as if nothing was his concern.

Li Quan and Cheng Suning looked pleased with themselves, obviously knowing in advance that the Yelang King would cause trouble with Xiang Shaolong during the banquet.

That Yelang Prince Hua Qi glared at Xiang Shaolong with murderous intent.

The Yelang King nodded his head and shouted 'good!' twice before glaring sinisterly at Xiang Shaolong with his fierce eyes and said: "I heard that you Wan Ruiguang boasted in front of the Empress Dowager today that you wanted the Dian King Li Ling's life. This King felt puzzled after hearing that. Wan Ruiguang, you have but fifty men with you and may not even be able to

protecting the women and children. I would like to know what ability you have such that you have the guts to spout such lunacy. Wan Ruiguang, can you explain yourself?"

This speech provoked a round of laughter from the Yelang people, Li Quan, Huang Zhan and the rest, demonstrating his ability to humiliate with his words. [help!]

As the laughter died down, the hall became deathly silent and filled with explosive charge.

Li Quan, Cheng Suning, Huang Zhan, Huang Ba and the other core conspirators from the other camp could not help looking pleased with themselves.

Xiang Shaolong has seen enough of major events. He even disregards people like Lu Buwei, Tian Dan and such, so why would he fear a mere vassal lord who thinks too highly of himself. He pretended to be surprised and said: "The vassal lord loves to joke. The Dian King is presently in the Dian King's Mansion, neither did he change his name to some Li Ling, has the vassal lord been muddled by the three cups of watered wine?"

The Yelang King was stumped for a moment. Just as he was about to speak, Li Yuan guffawed out loud and said: "Vassal lord Hua Ciwa not only made a mistake, he has also overstepped the authority the Great Chu allowed him by privately conferring titles and riches to traitors. What kind of relationship does the Yelang King have with this traitor who betrayed is sovereign?"

These words were even harder to refute.

While Li Lings seizure of the Dian King's seat was with the tacit consent of King Xiaolie, it was never openly acknowledged. At this point, even the scheming and foresighted Lord Chunshen found it difficult to intercede.

The Qielan King was the Yelang King's mortal enemy and took the chance to add fuel to fire, saying: "If one day, Hua Ciwa's position is usurped by someone else, I can also enjoy the pleasure of privately conferring titles on people."

The Yelang King flew into a shameful rage and said: "Whoever is sitting on the Dian throne now is without doubt the ruler of Dian country. This is an incontestable fact. Only ignorant people will quibble over this obvious matter."

Everyone could tell that he was running out of arguments to justify himself.

Lord Longyang giggled delicately and said: "The vassal lord's words are lacking. It is said that if the name is not legitimate, the words will be untenable. Li Ling's name is indeed not legitimate, that is why the vassal lord's words are not tenable. These words are said by the former sages. Are you saying that the former sages are also ignorant?"

The moment these words were spoken, the whole floor except Xiang Shaolong was startled. This was because Lord Longyang represented the Wei King and his position was venerable. Whatever he said was Wei's position. For him to oppose Li Ling as the King of Dian is therefore a surprise.

Han Chuang also followed with a laugh and said: "What Lord Longyang said is reasonable. How can someone who murders his master in treason be treated as legitimate?"

Lord Chunshen and his party all looked at each other. Who would have thought that the Wei and Han representatives would both ridicule the Yelang King.

The ten bodyguards who came with the Yelang King all placed their hands on their sword hilts, looking like they wanted to bite people's heads off.

Guo Kai was completely baffled, not being able to figure out why Lord Longyang and Han Chuang would want to help 'Wan Ruiguang'.

After Xiang Shaolong saw Shan Rou again, he body was charged with strength and his hand tingled with expectation. He sniggered: "At present this Wan only has the sword on his person and a few steadfast and loyal men, really nothing much to show. If the vassal lord is interested, wouldn't it be a lot simpler to send someone forward to verify my ability?"

Nobody could predict that he would turn the tables and take the initiative, openly inviting a fight. The hall was so silent that one could hear a pin drop. The loudest noise was the Yelang King's panting. He was evidently exploding with rage.

With a violent bark, the Third Prince Hua Qi sprang up from the Yelang King's mat. He carried a battle axe in each hand. He clashed the two axes together with a loud clang, then loudly declared: "The Yelang King's third son Hua Qi

invites Wan Ruiguang to the arena for a contest."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly pleased and was just about to step out to deal a heavy blow to this kid. Who would know that the Jing Shan who was behind him was itching for a fight even more than he was. He dashed out and bowed, saying: "Your servant is Wan Shan. Would Master Wan please grant me permission to do battle?"

Xiang Shaolong was extremely pleased in his heart. Firstly, Jing Shan's combat ability was second only to Jing Jun, so he should have no problem with this kid.

Secondly, he wouldn't have to worry about arousing the Qielan Princess Nuo Caicai's interest and having to entertain her tonight after killing the Yelang kid.

Nonetheless, he wasn't going to let Lord Chunshen off so easily. Smiling at him, he said: "The Lord should understand that this contest is not just some ordinary bout. It is easy for blood to be drawn and lives to be taken, spoiling the festive spirit and could even break into an all-out riot. If the Lord objects, I will not accept this challenge."

The Yelang King still mistook this for cowardice, and sniggered, saying: "Life and death is fated. If you Wan Ruiguang have the ability to touch a strand of my son's hair, I, Hua Ciwa will not quarrel endlessly over this."

How would Lord Chunshen ruin his grand plan for tonight just with two sentences from Xiang Shaolong? He chuckled and said: "Since the Third

Prince has this interest, how could Huang Xie be the one to dampen the spirit? General Wan had better decide for himself."

Hua Qi hefted his axes and made a stance, seemingly unburdened by the weight of the axes, clearly an exceptionally strong man. He shouted explosively: "If you Wan Ruiguang kowtow and admit your mistake, we can let this matter drop."

Xiang Shaolong chortled and said: "Good!" After signaling to Jing Shan to take his life, he said: "Swords and sabers are blind! Everybody please be careful!"

Jing Shan exulted and rushed forward with big stride. He stood ten feet from Hua Qi with his sword still sheathed.

Huang Zhan suddenly stood up and shouted: "Wait!"

Everyone was startled and turned to him.

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to scan the floor to look for Shan Rou, only to find that all the servant girls had retreated to the back of the banquets hall and were standing with Lord Chunshen's family warriors. How could he spot this cunning and clever buddy in such a short time?

Huang Zhan's voice carried over: "If General Wan's side loses this bout, will he again send his underlings to die on his behalf?"

These two words were really overbearing and unreasonable. Even those who did now know what was going on could tell that Lord Chunshen and the

Yelang King had joined hands to bully Xiang Shaolong.

Nonetheless, nobody dared to say anything. Only the Qielan King sneered and said: "This contest has yet to be decided, isn't Master Huang's words premature?"

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan looked at each other and laughed, the former lazily said: "What wise opinion does Master Huang have?"

Huang Zhan shouted harshly: "Shouldn't the next bout be between you and me?"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "Master, don't be so impatient. Its not to late to speak of this again after this bout. Begin the fight!"

Hua Qi has lost his patience waiting. He bellowed a battle cry like thunder and raised both battle axes, looking extremely bold and powerful. He brandished his axes in a series of severe chops and hacks, and swept towards Jing Shan like a breaking wave flying into the sky. He was certainly an arrogant general who thought himself above all. Everyone was moved with his display. Even Li Yuan was worried for Jing Shan. Nuo Caicai was even more nervous, her hands clasping her chest.

Jing Shan was calm and fearless, and his sword flashed out like lightning, carrying with it the deadliness of a viper. His steady yet swift movements looked like rolling winds in the clouds. Jumping, leaning, hacking and thrusting, every move was aimed at the enemies openings and vulnerabilities. Together with his flashing speed and his graceful dancelike

footwork, he seemed to be using nothing but a defense and counter-attack strategy.

The sound of clashing axes and swords rang without pause. Jing Shan periodically advanced and retreated. Hua Qi could not glean one bit of advantage.

The countenance of the Yelang people and Lord Chunshen changed instantly. They could not imagine that some random person from Xiang Shaolong's entourage could contend with Hua Qi, the number one warrior in Yelang. Moreover, his arm strength was clearly greater than Hua Qi's, how could they not fear and despair?

By this time, Hua Qi had exhausted his strength. Since his axes were heavy, he became momentarily sluggish. As he waned, Jing Shan waxed and his sword exploded forward, forcing Hua Qi back two steps.

Hua Qi was greatly embarrassed and rashly counter-attacked in a mad fury.

Jing Shan gave a long demonic laugh and moved forward like a flash of lightning. He unexpectedly raised his sword hilt towards the axe coming at his temple, blocking Hua Qi's most powerful right-handed axe attack. He then bent low, letting Hua Qi's left handed axe fly over his head. The sword in his hand moved as if electrified, shooting towards Hua Qi's stomach from an oblique angle.

Hua Qi was scared stiff and both axes flew from his hands while he suddenly retreated.

Jing Shan sheathed his sword and coldly watched Hua Qi retreating.

From the time the two men started fighting, the entire banquet floor was quiet without a whisper. This moment everyone focused on Hua Qi's body. They all knew that he had been injured seriously but just didn't know whether he was in mortal danger.

Hua Qi retreated another two steps before emitting a heart rending shriek and collapsing on the ground with a loud crash.

The Yelang King frantically stood up and yelled madly: "My son!"

The Yelang people had already dashed out as a group to examine the Hua Qi lying on the ground. They couldn't help but see the fountains of blood gushing from his chest and stomach.

Jing Shan nonchalantly return to his mat. As he passed by Nuo Caicai, he reached out, hugged her and kissed her on the mouth before letting her go.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen, Huang Zhan and the rest all left their seats to take a look at Hua Qi.

The Yelang King suddenly let out an earth-shaking cry and stood up from Hua Qi's side. He pointed his finger at Xiang Shaolong and screamed: "Wan Ruiguang! This blood debt for killing my son, I shall demand from you ten million times."

Most of the people on the banquet floor looked disdainful. They all despised

the fact that he had so quickly reneged on his earlier claim that life and death were fated and that he would not pursue any grudge.

Lord Chunshen personally pulled the Yelang King back to his banquet mat. Hua Qi's corpse was carried out the back door. The floor was still covered with blood, presenting a ghastly sight.

The festive atmosphere had naturally evaporated, but nobody blamed Xiang Shaolong because the whole matter was evidently the work of the Yelang King and Lord Chunshen. Everyone also knew that the best was yet to come.

The Qielan King broke the tense and silent atmosphere with a loud laugh, saying: "That General Wan has such a divine subordinate is cause to celebrate. The General is sure to be able to accomplish your objective of reclaiming your land soon."

The Yelang King stared at the Qielan King with his blazing eyes, but was angered speechless.

Huang Zhan returned from the back of the hall and walked towards the center of the arena with his hand on his sword hilt. He soberly said: "Wan Ruiguang! It is now our turn."

Li Yuan asked in a puzzled tone: "This matter is truly puzzling. It is clearly a matter between Dian and Yelang. Why is Master Huang acting as if someone has killed your parents? My hand is also very itchy. Why don't I play along with you instead!"

Everyone including Lord Chunshun's countenance changed at these words. This meant that Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are now openly at war.

Huang Zhan knew that his sword skills were still inferior to Li Yuan's. He could only bitterly endure this and coldly said: "This does not concern Premier Li. Wan Ruiguang! Are you going to send someone else to do your battle again?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled sardonically, saying: "Master Huang is blinded with anger and is not in shape for a duel. Moreover, as I have said before, I will not touch the young master unless the Lord permits.

All the guests' attention naturally shifted to Lord Chunshen.

Lord Chunshen could only keep his bitterness to himself.

At this point, if he doesn't strike, everything will cease, but if he does strike, the situation will only come to an end when someone dies.

This Wan Ruiguang's underling was already so formidable. The man himself must be unfathomable.

The problem was that the Yelang King had already sacrificed a son. If he did not let Huang Zhan battle, how was he to account to the Yelang King?

He couldn't help regretting not springing his surprise attack earlier. If he used underhanded methods under the present circumstances, he will gain the ridicule of the whole world.

In reality, the ambush he arranged tonight was just a back-up, not necessarily to kill Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan on the spot. He only hoped to delay things till morning so that he can coordinate his assault with Dou Jie. If he killed Li Yuan just like that, it would be difficult for him to prevent Li Yanyan from mobilizing the Royal Guards in a counter-attack.

As he was frantically considering all this, Huang Zhan had already said: "Will dad please allow your son to go to battle!"

Lord Chunshen silently heaved a deep sigh and nodding his head, said: "Be careful, son!"

The entire banquet floor perked up. The majority of the guests hoped to see Huang Zhan perish under Xiang Shaolong's sword.

This person has always relied on his father's protection, fearlessness rampaging through Shouchun, both hands reeking with blood. It was just that nobody could contain him!

Xiang Shaolong chortled and stood up. He moved outside the arena and patted his sword hilt lightly three times. This was the coded signal for his men to prepare their collapsible crossbows.

At the same time he said indifferently: "It would be the best for the Lord to withdraw his permission. Master Huang's heart is now filled with animosity and a murderous spirit. I would like to be merciful, but it will be difficult."

Everybody felt that his tone was boastful. Nonetheless just seeing his casual

posture, they could see his world dominating might. Huang Zhan was a far cry compared to him, hence everybody also got the feeling that his tone was justified.

Huang Zhan did not wait for Lord Chunshen's reply and barked: "Who wants you to be merciful?"

Brandishing his sword, he ploughed forward in a mad dash.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has always relied on his prestige to go on a rampage, regarding no one. That is why he deliberately provoked him to anger. He has now been suckered by Xiang Shaolong's ploy. He focused his mind and Blood Wave left its scabbard.

"Dang!"

The sound jolted the entire field.

Xiang Shaolong stood proudly with his precious sword. Huang Zhan staggered back unsteadily with his sword. He was actually forced into retreat just by Xiang Shaolong's one move.

Xiang Shaolong gave a long laugh: "Master Huang! How about stopping the fight now?"

Lord Chunshen stood up and shouted: "Son!"

The hands of Lord Chunshen's warriors who standing at the back all strayed

to their sword hilts, greatly increasing the tension in the hall.

While everyone's eyes were focused on the arena, Jing Shan and his party used this golden opportunity to load their crossbows under the table.

All the banquet guests were stupefied.

Huang Zhan has always used his bravery and strength to gain the reputation of being Chu's number two swordsman after Li Yuan. Who would have known that he would be forced into such difficulty, cutting such a sorry figure after only one clash. Who would not be shocked?

At the side, Li Yuan was perceptive. He knew that Huang Zhan's mind was clouded with violent rage. Xiang Shaolong's sword move was also sophisticated. He struck precisely when the opponent's equilibrium was the weakest. That was how he achieved this seemingly mystical result. It was also demonstrably clear that Xiang Shaolong's arm strength was greater than Huang Zhan's.

Huang Zhan had retreated up to twelve steps before he could stop. Who would have thought that Xiang Shaolong would repeat his words: "Master Huang! Let this matter go!"

How could Huang Zhan withdraw after such great humiliation? He violently screamed: "I will slaughter you!" He pounced forward again.

While the opponent was halfway there, Xiang Shaolong moved forward suddenly and with a rapid attacking move, mercilessly bore over, meeting

strength with strength.

The sound of a girl cheering and clapping sounded out suddenly. It turned out to be Nuo Caicai solitarily doing a cheerleader's act.

Because this was not some casual fight, everyone was holding their breath and keeping quiet. Nuo Caicai's clapping and cheering was really jarring, but nobody had the interest to pay her any attention.

The clashing sound of metal on metal rang out continuously.

The two men swept past each other.

Xiang Shaolong stopped abruptly and still with his back to Huang Zhan, he sheathed his sword.

Huang Zhan rushed forward another five steps before emitting a heart rending and miserable shriek. His word fell to the ground and with his left hand clutching his right, he knelt down. At this moment everyone realized that his right hand had been cut off neatly at the wrist, and had fallen along with his sword.

Xiang Shaolong faced heavenwards and laughed: "Anyone who wants to kill me, this person shall serve as a warning."

Lord Chunshen screamed: "Wan Ruiguang!"

Xiang Shaolong said without turning his head: "I warned the Lord many times

not to let your son enter battle. Its a pity that the Lord wanted to kill me too badly. You can only reap what you sow. Who can the Lord blame?"

The Yelang King suddenly stood up and barked: "Kill him!"

Lord Chunshen also yelled: "Every debt has its perpetrator. Everyone please remain at your tables." He picked up his cup and hurled it against the floor. "Peng!"

The cup disintegrated.

The ten over men behind Lord Chunshen rushed forth like a tide. Seven of them remained by Lord Chunshen while the other eight rushed towards the center of the hall and helped Huang Zhan up.

The other family warriors rushed forth from all four sides of the banquet hall, forming a human wall to cut Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan off from the other guests while surrounding them at the same time.

Lord Chunshen's family warriors who were originally behind the two men Xiang and Li retreated to the two sides instead. More than twenty of them went towards the Qielan King's banquet mat to dissuade them from getting involved.

The sound of swords leaving their scabbards sounded unceasingly.

Lord Chunshen laughed from behind the human wall and said: "Didn't expect this right? If you order your men to lay down their arms, maybe I will spare

your wretched lives."

Li Yuan remained calmly seated on his mat. He did not seem to notice the gleaming swords surrounding him. Sneering, he said: "The Lord is really audacious. Aren't you afraid of injuring the guests accidentally? Are you thinking of mounting a rebellion?"

Xiang Shaolong stood tall with a peaceful look and laughed out loud, saying: "Huang Xie, you are gravely mistaken."

Lord Chunshen sniggered and said: "We shall see!"

With a "Peng Peng!" sound, all the doors were shut.

Xiang Shaolong saw Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and the rest grasping their sword hilts one after another. He announced: "Everyone, please do not get involved or stand up. I will settle this with Huang Xie. Make your move!"

At this moment, Jing Shan and the forty-eight men were all still seated on the banquet mats. They were all completely expressionless, causing those who looked at them to feel a sense of chill.

Lord Chunshen yelled: "Attack!"

"Peng!"

The hidden door behind Jing Shan and the rest opened. A few tens of men with lances came out and attacked towards Jing Shan and gang.

The guests could not imagine that Lord Chunshen would have this trick up his sleeves. Nuo Caicai was the first to exclaim hoarsely.

Only then did Jing Shan and the rest start moving.

The forty-eight men spread out like a fountain, rolling on the floor and springing up. Forty-eight flashes of light flew from their hands. It turned out to be flying daggers concealed in their hands.

In the midst of miserable cries, the incoming men were hit by the daggers and fell to the ground.

Only then did they use the crossbows. Flights of crossbow bolts flew out accurately and unerringly, causing the defenseless attackers coming in to fall down in rows. The attack melted like ice.

The forty-eight men rapidly loaded their bolts with lightning quick movements, firing ceaselessly. They not only drove those attacking from the hidden door back out, they also forced those family warriors already in the hall to the back, protecting the rest of the banquet guests.

Before long, the ground was littered with enemies groaning in pain and lying their own blood. The situation was extremely wretched.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan rushed towards Lord Chunshen. The ten odd family warriors tried to block them.

Jing Shan, Wu Shu and the rest of the forty-eight men spread out across the

banquet hall, commanding all the strategic positions, merely using the crossbows to shoot any enemy soldiers who dared to attack. All the guests remained completely still in their seats, not daring to budge, afraid to endanger themselves in the crossfire.

Li Yuan's sword stabbed into Huang Ba's chest in a lightning move. Just as he was kicking aside the corpse, Shan Rou's shriek carried over the milieu: "Everyone stop! If not I will slaughter Huang Xie."

Both sides looked towards Lord Chunshen only to discover that he had been forced to a corner by a servant girl. A sharp dagger was pressed against his neck. His face was ashen like a corpse.

The entire battle scene froze.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan simultaneously rushed over and shielded her from both sides.

Shan Rou sternly shouted: "Throw down your swords!"

All the family warriors looked at each other at a loss of what to do. Huang Zhan was seriously wounded, Huang Ba had been killed. There was no one left to lead them.

The Yelang King madly yelled: "Kill them for me!"

When his men jumped up, two rows of crossbow bolts had already flown towards them. Including the Yelang King, the ten over people were all struck

dead.

Nobody else dared to move an inch.

Shan Rou yelled again: "Still haven't abandoned your swords?!"

It was not clear who started first, but with a sonorous "Keng Qiang" sound, the ground was covered in discarded swords in an instant.

Jing Shan and the rest forced all the family warriors to the area behind Lord Chunshen's host seat. Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan forced Lord Chunshen towards the side of the main entrance.

Li Quan and Cheng Suning were seized and trussed up together with Lord Chunshen.

The special forces soldiers demonstrated a high level of efficiency, some advancing and some retreating, every movement was tidy and orderly, with no confusion at all.

Everyone could only stare mutely at this unimaginable outcome.

Li Yuan leaned over to Xiang Shaolong's ear and intimated: "Only now do I understand what is meant by 'To capture the thieves, first capture the king (ringleader)'. I submit to Brother Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled to himself and turned towards the one and only unique woman Shan Rou who was staring straight back at him. He laughed,

saying: "Elder sister is formidable."

The lovely Shan Rou snorted at him, immensely proud of herself.

Lord Chunshen asked in a trembling voice: "What do you intend to do?"

Xiang Shaolong greeted the floor of quests and said: "I, Wan Ruiguang am deeply sorry for causing everyone some false alarm. All the esteemed guests may leave. Nonetheless, please wait for a short while and allow us to open a route for you."

Before he had finished speaking, the sound of slaughter could be heard outside the hall. It was a while before the noise died down again. Everyone's countenance changed.

A knock on the door transmitted a coded signal. Wu Yan who was in charge of the door flung it open. Lou Wuxin rushed in and said: "I have not failed my mission!"

Li Yuan laughed and said: "Everyone may leave now. We will secure the area for you." He exultantly looked at Xiang Shaolong. Both knew that victory was in their grasp tonight.

Chapter 09

The Villain Is Taught a Lesson

After Xiang Shaolong and his party dragged away Lord Chunshen's gang of three, the remaining family warriors within Lord Chunshen's residence gushed out in full strength. Who would have known that the moment they stepped onto the street, they were ambushed by Li Yuan's family warriors hiding with bows on the rooftops on either side of the street. Men fell and horses collapsed. They were utterly defeated.

Next, under Lou Wuxin, Dong Luzi's and the rest's command, hundreds more of Li Yuan's family warriors rushed out from the buildings at the side. They carried lances, charging at Lord Chunshen's frightened family warriors in waves. Even though the enemy had twice the number of men as they had, they were without a head. Their morale was low, and all dispersed and fled in the face of the assault.

Lou Wuxin and the rest pressed home the advantage and attacked towards Lord Chunshen's residence.

They had been given strict orders not to massacre women and children, and also those who surrendered.

This moment, the Yelang King's Mansion was ablaze with flames reaching to the sky. Billows of thick smoke rose up into the clear night sky.

Of the ten buildings, four were on fire. The ear-splitting cry of murder sounded unceasingly.

The battle at the Dian King's Mansion had ended a short while ago.

The attacker's were Li Ling's hundred plus followers. They had climbed the high walls on the left and right to get into the mansion. They had thought that they could gain an easy victory. How could they expect that arrows would fly in like rain from all four directions. Half of them were felled in the blink of an eye. The rest who had managed to enter the mansion ran straight into the elite soldiers led by Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi.

They could not even escape with their lives, much less to kill and burn.

Under Li Yanyan's orders, Du Gui secured the palace. The newly promoted Inner City Official Lian Anting had also sealed off the Inner City and set up inspection checkpoints on the streets. At the same time, he also safeguarded the foreign embassies and diplomats. Everything was orderly and tidy. Even though they did not participate directly in the struggle, they prevented other parties from interfering.

The Yelang King's Mansion was surrounded by Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong's allied troops in a watertight encirclement. All who tried to come out were chased back in with powerful arrow shots.

The allied soldiers all had a red sash on their helmets to distinguish themselves.

Even though the Inner City had been plunged into a wild and noisy battle, the Outer City was completely undisturbed. Wu Zhan had also received orders from Li Yanyan not to get involved in the Inner City affairs.

Dou Jie and his large army outside the city were cut off from all news from within the city. He even thought that the fire was from the Dian King's Mansion that Li Ling's men had besieged.

Lord Chunshen's gang of three were kept prisoner on separate horse carriages under the close watch of the guardians.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan, these two war comrades with a complicated relationship, stood shoulder to shoulder outside the Yelang King's Mansion, observing the situation.

The battle cry sounded.

Close to a thousand of Li Yuan's family warriors carrying shields split into two groups, forcing entrance into the front and rear gates of the Yelang King's Mansion. An even more intense round of battle cries and killing sounds rose up.

This round of battle concluded quickly. Teng Yi's imposing body appeared at the mansion gate. At his back, Wu Guang and the rest led a bound man out. They came straight towards Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan and pushed the bound man to the ground.

Wu Guang rushed forwards in big strides and grabbing his hair, raised his face

while forcing him to kneel.

Under the light of the torches, they could see that even though the man's expression was now twisted, his facial features were actually well proportioned, sanctimonious and dignified. Who would have known that in reality, from the time he was young, he had never been a good person.

Li Yuan's two eyes gleamed and he chortled saying: "Li Ling old chap, how have you been!" "Peng!" Li Yuan kicked him in the lower abdomen, causing so much pain that he curled up.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that Li Yuan would beat him to death right there and hollered: "Tie him up and put him into a carriage. We shall return to the Dian King's Mansion."

Teng Yi came to his side and said: "These Yelang people and Li Ling's Dian soldiers are all good-for-nothing. There was hardly any special defensive arrangements in the mansion. They could not even resist our crossbow and fire arrow attacks for a short while. Only ten of our men sustained light injuries."

Xiang Shaolong mused that these elite soldiers of his were as good as twenty-first Century special forces. They had all been trained in his modern methods and were best able to demonstrate their efficiency and power in city warfare. The Yelang King and Li Ling's men underestimated the enemy and did not prepare for defense. Moreover they had come from afar and had yet to have a proper rest. How could they present any real opposition with their tired men and horses?

This demonstrates the critical factors 'heavenly timing, favorable location and ready people' needed for one to achieve victory in battle.

This moment, Li Yuan walked over and patted both men's shoulders, saying: "This business tonight, I, Li Yuan will engrave deep within my heart. No matter what happens between Qin and Chu in the future, I will still be a friend to the both of you."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "It is unlikely that I and Brother Li will meet in the field of battle. Moreover, I intend to retire in seclusion at the earliest opportunity. Brother Li does not have to worry."

Li Yuan was stupefied and wanted to question further when Lou Wuxin and a group of family warriors approached riding fast. They called out: "We can't find Tian Dan. It is said that he left Shouchun this morning. We need to interrogate Lord Chunshen on this."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a glance. Even though they had known that the outcome was likely to be thus, they nonetheless couldn't help but be disappointed.

Li Yuan opined: "Dan Chu and the rest have yet to arrive. He should not have returned to Qi. Ai, it is nonetheless hard to say." Lou Wuxin suggested: "The Inner City is under control. It is now time to round up the clique of traitors."

As Li Yuan was about to agree, he was dragged aside by Xiang Shaolong who earnestly requested: "Can Brother Li limit his reprisal to Lord Chunshen and his few collaborators? From the beginning, taking revenge to settle a grudge

has never been the best solution."

Li Yuan dithered for a while before nodding and said: "If I can't even do such a simple thing, how can I repay Brother Xiang's grace? We'll do it Brother Xiang's way!" He instructed Lou Wuxin: "Help me inform all the high-ranking military officers in the Inner City, this incident was the result of the three men Lord Chunshen, Li Quan and Cheng Suning's rebellion. Besides these three men's direct male relatives, all the woman may return to their mother's houses. Servants and maids may be placed under alternative employ."

Lou Wuxin was extremely startled and displayed a puzzled look. He only proceeded to execute the order after a long pause.

The fire at the Yelang King's Mansion had been extinguished. The Inner City had been restored to peacefulness and tranquility. Only the sound of marching troops reminded the people in the city of the issue at hand.

"Pa La!" Madam Zhuang raised her hand and twice slapped the Li Ling who was kneeling on the street, pointing her finger and berating him.

Li Ling knew that his power was gone, and remained silent in his disappointment. He looked like a defeated rooster.

You Cui and You Ning rushed forward with faces full of hot tears and joined Madam Zhuang in the abuse.

Zhuang Kong and the rest also cried tears of excitement when they saw that the villain had been captured and that their little Prince's restoration was at

hand.

The impossible had become reality.

Shan Rou had arrived earlier and was with Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi in an extremely warm-hearted embrace.

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's return, they dragged him into the inner hall to chat.

Lord Chunshen's gang of three were imprisoned separately awaiting action.

After sitting down in the inner hall, Shan Rou blissfully said to Xiang Shaolong: "At least you have a bit of conscience. In the end you were willing to come and deal with the big villain Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "How did you end up in Lord Chunshen's residence?" Zhao Zhi delightedly replied on her behalf: "Sister Rou has always been pursuing Tian Dan. She guessed that he would need to pass through Shouchun on the way back to Qi from Xianyang. She also knew that he and Lord Chunshen were collaborators, so she sold herself as a servant girl and came to Lord Chunshen's residence."

Xiang Shaolong said in puzzlement: "Where has Tian Dan disappeared off to?" Shan Rou replied: "He is going to meet up with Dan Chu. It has been reported that he is on a boat on the Huai River heading East. I was just fretting at how to handle this matter. Thankfully you have arrived."

Teng Yi entered and said: "We have discovered Tian Dan's whereabouts. He

left the city secretly this morning. He is on a boat to Chengyang to meet up with Dan Chu's battered army. He will take at least a fortnight to reach Qi. We have enough time to prepare."

At this point, Wu Guang's stuck his big head out from behind Teng Yi's shoulder and announced: "The Empress Dowager is in the outer hall awaiting Master Xiang!" Li Yanyan's face was covered by a heavy veil. She was covered in a maroon cloak and was standing and looking at the bright moon in the night sky outside the window. It was hard to determine her intentions.

The Royal Guard Captain Du Gui and the hundred plus guards had been ordered to remain outside the room.

Xiang Shaolong knew that she was filled with conflicting emotions and did not disturb her. He stood quietly at one side.

At this moment, Jing Shan and the rest dragged the two men Li Ling and Li Quan into the hall and forced them to kneel on the ground.

As Li Quan saw Li Yanyan, he thought she here to save him and wailing, he said: "Empress Dowager please arbitrate on the old official's behalf....." Li Yanyan coldly shouted: "Shut up!"

Li Quan wanted to speak further, but was boxed in the mouth by Wu Shu. Two incisors broke immediately and he was rendered speechless.

Li Yanyan softly said: "Besides General Wan, everyone else please withdraw."

Jing Shan and the rest looked at Xiang Shaolong and saw him make the hand signal for them to obey. They then let go of the two men and went outside the hall.

Li Yanyan's plaintive voice arose like a dream, saying: "Do you two remember the incident five years ago?"

Li Quan and Li Ling exchanged a look, both showing fear and surprise.

Li Yanyan slowly turned her body and uncovered her veil, exposing her magnificent and elegant face. Her eyes were nonetheless cold as ice, shooting forth a piercing hatred.

Li Quan lisped through his blood-filled mouth and softly said: "Yanyan, don't forget that I am your uncle. I have always loved you dearly....."

Li Yanyan shook her head and said: "It is precisely because one is my uncle and one is my cousin that all my life I can't forget your beastly conduct. If it was an outsider, I might have been able to endure it. I leveraged my own body just for this day. Li Quan, get your a** here."

Li Quan was terror stricken and repeatedly kowtowed and said: "Empress Dowager please spare my life!" With a "Pei!" sound, Li Ling spat a glob of spittle, and said in contempt: "What Empress Dowager, you were even ridden by me Li Ling....."

"Peng!" Xiang Shaolong's leg flew out and hit him square in the face. Li Ling fell face up on the ground and could not speak anymore.

Li Yanyan flashed Xiang Shaolong a grateful look and slowly walked over to Li Quan.

Li Quan knew something was wrong and looked up in shock. Li Yanyan raised her sleeve, exposing her powdered and tender arm with a gleaming sharp poisoned dagger. Quick as lightning, she thrust the dagger into Li Quan's stomach.

Li Quan gave a miserable scream and fell to the ground dead along with the dagger.

Li Yanyan turned around and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's bosom. She panted rapidly but did not let out any tears.

When she had calmed down a little, Li Yanyan left Xiang Shaolong's embrace and requested: "Can you kill Li Ling for me?"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "I am not used to killing people who are defenseless. Allow me to find someone else to do it, ok?...."

Li Yanyan looked at him deeply, hanged her head and said: "You are truly a good man. Alright!" She then returned to the window and turned her beautiful back towards him.

Xiang Shaolong gave the Li Ling who was groaning on the ground a look and thought: this person had committed all sorts of evil deeds, certainly death was too good for him. He opened the door and was about to call for people

when Li Yuan and Madam Zhuang arrived together.

Xiang Shaolong did not wish to let them know that Li Yanyan killed Li Quan herself, and so whispered: "Empress Dowager is in a bad mood. Let us not disturb her. Li Quan is gone. I'll leave Li Ling to you guys!" Li Yanyan appeared behind Xiang Shaolong with her phoenix coronet and veil replaced and firmly said: "No, I want to see him executed with my own eyes!"

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner residence, it was just past the fourth night watch. Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou were all in high spirits relating all the happenings to each other. Shan Rou had removed her disguise and returned to her regular appearance.

Xiang Shaolong felt like he had moved from one universe to another, leaving behind the vengeful struggle that he had loathed but could not avoid, and arriving in this gentle and sweet little world of his.

What he sought after here was not carnal satisfaction, but spiritual peace and quiet. His needs were especially pronounced after the night of blood and gore. His mind and body were both exhausted. This was the price of survival and protecting his loved ones after all.

The three ladies' eyes flitted over to him in unison.

Shan Rou still looks like she is dissatisfied with something. She squinted at him with her intelligent eyes and leaned on him, her appearance as mesmerizing as ever.

Xiang Shaolong sat beside Shan Rou. Before he could say a word, Shan Rou raised a finger and pressed it on his lips, solemnly saying: "Don't ask me about what has happened. If you wish to know, please asked the two of them. I will not repeat what I have just said again."

The feeling of familiar warmth and comradeship welled up in Xiang Shaolong. He laughed without speaking.

Shan Rou removed her finger and suddenly kissed him on the lips before smiling enchantingly, saying: "I have really missed you. I think of you at least once a month."

After teasing Xiang Shaolong, she giggled together with Zhao Zhi.

Ji Yanran gently asked: "How is the situation outside?" Xiang Shaolong replied: "We are just waiting for Dou Jie to report to the royal court tomorrow. Li Yuan has sent a man that Dou Jie trusts to tell him that Li Yuan and I have been killed by Lord Chunshen. We hope to swindle him into entering the city without precautions."

Ji Yanran elucidated: "It is difficult for Dou Jie to clap with only one hand, what can he accomplish? How could the King's city be so easily breached? His subordinates would not have been willing to follow him in staking their lives and families in this one risky gamble. All of them have clansmen or relatives living in the Inner City."

Xiang Shaolong lay down on her mat and sighed, saying: "So comfortable!" Zhao Zhi said: "Night has fallen. Hubby should take a bath and rest. Let Sister

Rou accompany you tonight."

Shan Rou was greatly embarrassed and jumped up saying: "Who does he think he is? Who said anything about accompanying him?" Xiang Shaolong's childish spirit was provoked and exerted himself to get up, saying: "Do you think you are calling the shots?" Shan Rou gave a shriek and ran into the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong had just shut his eyes for a while before he had to leave the Shan Rou whose body had bewitched him upside down the last night. He hurried along with Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi to attend the morning court session.

Li Yuan was wearing his court dress and was waiting for them outside the palace gate under the protection of a large group of bodyguards.

After the customary greetings, Li Yuan allowed Madam Zhuang and her son to proceed first before riding in with Xiang Shaolong. He said excitedly: "Dou Jie fell into our trap. The moment he entered the city, he was seized by Wu Zhan. Wu zhan has now assumed command of the External Defense Army and has left the city to receive the troops."

They did not have many words before they reached the entrance of the main palace hall.

The four of them entered together. The three conspirators Lord Chunshen, Dou Jie and Cheng Suning were trussed up together and kneeling at the feet of Li Yanyan who was sitting high on the imperial dais.

Most of the officials present had attended the last night's banquet and therefore knew of Lord Chunshen's intent to kill Li Yuan and Wan Ruiguang. They also knew that Shouchun was now under the control of Li Yuan. Who would dare to plead on behalf of the three of them?

Li Yanyan had the three men's charges read to them. Lord Chunshen was not only guilty of attempting to murder the Imperial Uncle and remaining members of the Zhuang family, he was also guilty of inciting his son Huang Hu to lead men in an attack on Xu Xian. When this matter was reveal, it caused an uproar.

Dou Jie was guilty of moving army troops without approval and with the intent of revolt. Cheng Suning was guilty of being an accomplice.

Immediately after the charges had been read, all three men were led out of the hall and beheaded. Following that, Li Yanyan proclaimed Li Yuan as the Right Premier and also announced a few more appointment changes.

Finally, she re-affirmed Zhuang Baoyi as the Dian Crown Prince and ordered troops to be sent to assist the mother and son to restore their country.

After the court was dismissed, Li Yanyan summoned Madam Zhuang and her son. Li Yuan was extremely busy himself. Xiang Shaolong was completely idle from head to toe and took the opportunity to take an incognito tour with the three ladies Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou, feasting their eyes on Shouchun's famously beautiful scenery. Teng Yi left to prepare their offensive against Tian Dan.

At dusk, the four of them finally returned to the mansion after having had their fun. The moment they stepped into the mansion, they knew something was wrong.

Li Yuan, Lord Longyang and Han Chuang had all arrived. The all had serious expressions, looking as if they were facing imminent calamity. An intensely ominous feeling well up in Xiang Shaolong and he asked somberly: "Has Xu Xian met with a mishap?" Li Yuan nodded and replied: "Not only has Xu Xian met with a mishap, it turns out that Tian Dan has fooled even Lord Chunshen. He is secretly returning to Qi via a land route."

Lord Longyang said: "He was afraid of getting embroiled in this latest massacre and therefore slipped away before anyone else."

Shan Rou bellowed out: "Pursue quickly. I know how to intercept him."

Xiang Shaolong collapsed down on his mat in extreme disappointment. Thinking about Xu Xian's indomitable character and his cheerful appearance, he could not help but shed tears.

Unexpectedly they had been dealt another blow by Lu Buwei. The hard-fought balance of power in Xianyang had been destroyed all at once.

Chapter 10

Numerous Difficulties and Dangers

Under the You sisters' miraculous hands, Xiang Shaolong saw his restored appearance reflected in the bronze mirror.

The two ladies were filled with the sorrow at the thought of parting, and could no longer banter with him as usual.

Xiang Shaolong was also a mass of worry due to the matter about Xu Xian.

Huang Hu had related the account himself. He had been captured by Li Yuan at the city gate just as he was returning from the mission. Three thousand men had departed but only seven hundred returned. The battle must have been intense.

Under torture, Huang Hu revealed that one of Lu Buwei's spies had been concealed amongst Xu Xian's five hundred attendants. That was how they were able mount a precise ambush in a valley near the Wei border. Huang Hu personally shot the fatal arrow. Under the Qin soldiers' death-defying counter-attack, Huang Hu suffered many casualties and beat a hasty retreat. Some of his men were even captured. That was why Li Yuan was so vexed. Lord Longyang also feared that Lu Buwei would use the fact that the incident had happened in Wei as an excuse to mobilize an attack against them.

Tracing to the bottom of the matter, the ringleaders had always been Tian Dan and Lu Buwei.

The most hateful was Tian Dan's deliberate stirring of conflict, hoping to profit from the turbulence.

After Xiang Shaolong had heard the whole account though, his spirits rose as it was actually unknown whether Xu Xian was really dead.

Nonetheless he had determined to set out at dawn to hunt down and kill Tian Dan.

Tian Dan had left Shouchun only with slightly more than a hundred close followers. To avoid Chu's customs checkpoints, he had to take a roundabout route. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong had the assistance of the Chu people and could take shortcuts. That is why even though they lagged by two days, they had a very good chance of intercepting Tian Dan before he crossed the Qi border.

As he rose to leave, the You sisters couldn't help throwing themselves into his embrace. They only sent him out tearfully after repeatedly imploring him to visit Dian whenever he had the chance.

Madam Zhuang intercepted him outside the door and pulled him into a room. Only after a lingering kiss did she say plaintively: "After tonight's separation, we may never have the chance to meet again. Shaolong ah, why is your feeling for me so ephemeral? I wish to serve you on the mat, but never got the chance!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "The way things developed was beyond all our expectations. Madam need not be so broken-hearted, however. Perchance I will be able to steal some time off in the future to come and visit you folks."

Madam Zhuang rejoiced and said: "The gentlemen has spoken!" Xiang Shaolong replied: "The fast horse is whipped!" He reached out his hand and teased her chin. As he gave her a sorrowful kiss, gentle feelings welled up from the bottom of his heart and he softly said: "Don't cry. You should be laughing instead. Take care of Baoyi. I believe that we will meet again someday."

Madam Zhuang replied: "I will be returning to Dian the day after tomorrow. If you visit us on your way back to Qin, I will laugh for your pleasure."

After sharing hardship for such a long period, he would be lying to himself if he said he hadn't developed feelings. Although he was in a hurry to kill Tian Dan and return to Qin, under the present circumstances, he could not refuse.

Only after another round of intimacy did Xiang Shaolong extricate himself and leave the room. Everyone in his party was packed and ready to go. Li Yuan was talking to Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Teng Yi. Seeing him arrive, he pulled him aside and said: "I just saw Yanran. My heart is actually comforted. Indeed it is only you who are a match for her. I am too eager to pursue fame and fortune, power and influence."

Xiang Shaolong silently faced him and patted his shoulder, saying: "I was just a little bit luckier. If Brother Li had met her earlier... in reality she has always

admired you."

Li Yuan sighed and said: "Just based on vision and aspirations, I am already unable to match you. Hei, Xiu'er wants me to wish you a pleasant journey."

Xiang Shaolong thought about Guo Xiu'er and his heart became sorrowful.

At this moment, Teng Yi came to hurry them, saying: "We need to set off!" Everyone left together and mounted their war-horses. Ji Yanran and the ladies had their faces veiled, shielding their exceptional looks from the eyes of passersby.

Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Li Yuan sent them off personally. Under the lead of the Chu soldiers, they galloped towards the Inner City gates.

It was still before dawn. The pitch-black sky caused everyone to taste the bitter sadness of parting.

Will they ever meet again? Worse, Qin and the six South-Eastern countries were constantly at war. The possibility of having to face each other in battle caused everyone to be all the more melancholic."

Xiang Shaolong thoroughly abhors war, but it is one of the most inevitable realities in this era.

As they approached the palace, a horse carriage protected by a company of horses and men raced out and cut them off. Looks like Li Yanyan has arrived.

The Royal Guard Captain Du Gui galloped over and said: "The Empress Dowager would like to see Master Wan and invites Master Wan up the carriage."

Xiang Shaolong whose face was covered with a bamboo hat nodded and mounted Li Yanyan's horse carriage. Horses and men proceeded towards the Inner City gate.

Li Yanyan removed Xiang Shaolong's bamboo hat and dreamily sized him before saying in approval: "Xiang Shaolong is much better looking than Wan Ruiguang. No wonder Xiu'er is unable to forget you. Oh! I am not saying that she lusts after your charm and intelligence. Rather your present manner and temperament is a better match for your words and your lofty and heroic ideals."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Hadn't Empress Dowager decided not to send us off? Why did she change her mind unexpectedly? Li Yanyan threw herself into his bosom impulsively and hugged him with all her strength. She panted: "This is the reason. Thinking about how we might not meet again, Yanyan could not help being depressed and dispirited. If there is a day when Shaolong feels that he cannot prevail over Lu Buwei, the doors of my Great Chu is always open to you."

With the beauty's great favor, and thinking about her desolate and humiliating past, Xiang Shaolong's heart was kindled. He lowered his head, found her scorching lips and gave her deep kiss before baring his heart and saying: "I seldom regret missed romantic relationships. However, reflecting on the coming days, thinking about how I missed the opportunity to share

your quilt and pillow, to enjoy the kind of 'silence speaks a thousand words' and 'one spring night beats a thousand pounds of gold' kind of 'good times and beautiful scenery' with you, I can't help but feel the greatest regret."

Li Yanyan's heart and mind were both intoxicated. She said: "Nobody's words of endearment are as beautiful as yours. Still, what is the use of regret? Going by our speed now, it will take at least half a day before we reach the docks outside the city. There is much we can do!" Xiang Shaolong said in shock: "Are you saying.... Hei!" Li Yanyan pasted herself on his cheeks and said plaintively: "Who would know? Xiang Shaolong, didn't you just say that one Spring night is better than a thousand pounds of gold?" As Xiang Shaolong embraced this woman who was praised as the most youthful and beautiful Empress Dowager in the Warring States Era, all sorts of feelings welled up in his heart.

(You have to give it to XSL. This is about as flowery as it gets. I can't believe that lousy honey parable that he ripped off so long ago is still having such a great ripple effect all over the central plains!)

He had known her but for a few days, but felt as if it had been for half a lifetime. Perhaps, Li Yuan aside, he was the one who understood most her bitter experiences and inner world.

He did not know if he loved her more or pitied her more. But undoubtedly her beauty was sufficient to elicit uncontrollable feelings of adoration in him.

The most tragically romantic thing is that this relationship can last but a moment. That is why Li Yanyan cast off her majesty as Empress Dowager, forsaking everything to send him off and to seize this last opportunity,

ensuring that she would never be sad at having missed this short but ever valuable and memorable encounter.

All of a sudden, he melted.

What happened within the carriage was unreal.

Just like a deep and intoxicating dream.

They lost all bearing of where they were.

The setting sun descended West.

Three large ships had set sail, following the River Huai towards Chu's second largest city.

Xiang Shaolong found Shan Rou standing alone aft of the ship. Curious, he asked: "What is Sister Rou doing here?" Shan Rou irritably replied: "Can't I have some peace and quiet?" Xiang Shaolong went over and tentatively embraced her shoulders. Seeing that she only flashed him a glance without making another move, he was relieved and kissed her cheeks, gently saying: "If we can kill Tian Dan this time, would Sister Rou be willing to return to Xianyang with us?" Shan Rou softly and warmly leaned into his bosom and lightly said: "I am used to a wandering lifestyle, treating the world as my home. I am afraid that it would be difficult for me to remain in one place. If I have to see the same people everyday, how tedious it will be. I am not suited for family life."

Xiang Shaolong nodded and said: "This I understand. Hanging around the ends of the earth is certainly a fascinating way of life."

Shan Rou asked curiously: "Aren't you upset that I am so unfeeling?" Xiang Shaolong laughed nonchalantly and said: "Why should I be angry? What you said was an incontrovertible truth. When one eats the same thing over and over again, even the most exotic delicacies will taste like wax. However, you should at least come to Xianyang to see Shan Lan and her son. Your sister misses you so!"

Shan Rou replied: "I will go to Xianyang some day. However, I have promised someone that I would spend some time with him once this matter is over. We'll see what happens then!" Xiang Shaolong forced a laugh and said: "Is that your new lover?" Shan Rou whispered: "I really shouldn't be telling you this, but I don't want to lie to you. I don't know if it was because you had aroused my passions. After we parted, I had a few men, but none could replace you. This man that I intend to spend time with once rescued me from certain death and nursed me back from serious injuries. My feelings towards him started more as gratitude."

Xiang Shaolong was actually filled with jealousy, but on reflection realized that he had had relationships with many women. It was only right for Shan Rou to enjoy relationships with many men. Laughing with relief, he said: "Elder Sister should do whatever she wants. Even if you are married with children, please do not forget to visit us in Xianyang. Moreover, you have to do it before the Qin Crown Prince ascends the throne, else you may never find us again."

Shan Rou turned her head and gazed at him for a long while before saying in astonishment: "You are truly exceptional. All other men have become crazy with envy when they learned that I have another man in my heart. You are the only one who is completely unaffected. Don't you care about me one bit?"

Xiang Shaolong stopped smiling and said: "This is wrong, that is also wrong. What do you want from me?" Shan Rou's face displayed an eccentric expression, and with a sigh she said: "It is precisely because you are a true-blue wierdo that I Shan Rou am unable to forget you. That is a very painful feeling. Still, I just cannot give up my dream to wander the world. When I am tired of it one day, I will come look for you guys. Will you turn your back on me then?" Xiang Shaolong released her from his embrace and lazily stretched himself before saying dully: "Don't be oversensitive. As long as you deign to come to Xianyang within seven years, you will definitely find us."

Shan Rou stamped her foot in frustration and said: "I'm won't yield!" Xiang Shaolong has never seen her act like a spoilt little girl. He was astonished, saying: "What won't you yield to?" With a face full of irritation, she said: "What aren't you reacting like other men? Its as if you couldn't care less whether I come or not."

Xiang Shaolong bellowed in laughter and said: "Don't you want your independence? I am refraining from interfering with your way of life yet you are blaming me. What kind of logic is this?" Shan Rou pondered this for a while before giggling and pouncing on him with a hug. She raised her face which was pretty as a flower, and smiling enchantingly she said: "You are different from everybody else, its no wonder that I want to be intimate with

you."

Xiang Shaolong gently said: "Sister Rou should enjoy your life fully. That is everyone's fundamental right. If I say that I was not jealous, I would be lying to you. Its just that I felt that it is not my right to control you. I can only suppress my selfish desires and respect your freedom."

Shan Rou was moved and said: "This is the first time I've heard anything sensible from a man. But will you love me any less because of this?" Xiang Shaolong calmly replied: "I will never change my love for you, but will force myself not to think about you so much. This is because I will naturally remember that you might be in the arms of another man. That will cause me to be very uncomfortable. Everyone is self centered after all."

Shan Rou gave him a kiss and then tenderly and softly said: "You are very honest. In reality I am also wary of thinking about you for the same reason. I actually regret telling you this. It was only after parting with you that I realized that I could not forget you."

Xiang Shaolong softly kissed her lips and gently said: "Since this is the reality, both of us should accept it. It is time for dinner. Shall we return to the cabin?" Shan Rou stubbornly shook her head and said: "No, I am afraid that I will lose your love one of these days."

Xiang Shaolong mirthlessly said: "Elder Sister should stop pulling my leg. How could you be this kind of person? You are merely dissatisfied that I did not react to your affairs with other men as expected. You just want me to surrender, thats all!" Shan Rou stamped her foot again and said: "I hate you

to death. Quickly say that you are jealous to death."

Xiang Shaolong laughed and bent down saying: "Alright, I am jealous to death."

Shan Rou happily said: "This is more like it. Oh! I was just bluffing you just now. No other man has impressed me yet. But don't be too happy. That includes you. Come!" She then grabbed Xiang Shaolong's hand and led him back to the cabin.

Under the light of the wind lamps (lamps that can resist the wind), Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou sat in a circle on the banquet mat studying the map of the Chu-Qi border that was spread on the coffee table.

Teng Yi said: "After my careful study and analysis, I believe Tian Dan has at most three possible routes back to Qi. The first is to make landfall and discard his boat, ride furiously towards the Fuli pass and then buy a ship at Zhongli and return to Qi by water. The second is to select a few good horses at Fuli pass and follow the official roads through Peng City , Miao Hill and Kaiyang all the way to the Qi border. The last route is the most circuitous, that is to go East past Mingshan before returning to his country. I have traced the routes on the map in different colours, you should be able to understand at a glance.

As Xiang Shaolong and the rest were pondering the three lines, Shan Rou asserted: "There is no need to consider this further. This person Tian Dan loves comfort. He is sure to have selected the water route. Also, the governor

of Zhongli, Xia Ruzhang has always been close with Tian Dan. Whats more, Tian Dan does not know that we are hot on his tail, how could he trade the easy for the difficult?" Ji Yanran said: "If this is so, we might even be able to reach Zhongli before he embarks." Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

As Tian Dan had pretended to go to Chengyang by boat the day he left, he had to go against the current Westwards for more than ten miles from Shouchun before abandoning his boat and proceeding by land. After that he had to go into the countryside to buy horses for his hundred over people before heading for Fuli pass and Zhongli. With so many delays, he had naturally taken more time.

This person was certainly cunning and despicable. After he had instigated Lord Chunshen to assassinate Xu Xian, he slipped away immediately, leaving the Chu people to deal with the consequences themselves while he safely remained away from the furore.

Zhao Zhi said: "I am a little puzzled as to why Tian Dan is in such a hurry to return." Ji Yanran suddenly blanched and said: "Not good. I think Tian Dan wants to deal with Yan!" Teng Yi was also jolted and said: "Prince Dan is in danger!" Xiang Shaolong also realized what was happening.

Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's collaboration was based on mutual benefit. What Lu Buwei fears most is an alliance of the six countries, that is why he has always courted Tian Dan, not only hoping to keep Qi out of the alliance, but also hoping that he can damage any alliance between the other five countries.

That Qin armies were powerless to resist the recent incursion by the five countries' allied army further reinforced his thinking.

At the same time, he knew that Chu's past bitter experience would prevent them from allowing Qin to nibble away at the three Jin state's territory, hence he abandoned Chu as an ally in favor of Qi.

Of course Tian Dan knows that Lu Buwei is wildly ambitious, but he knew it was always better to rely on oneself than others. Being strong was the only way out for Qi.

In this era of war, the only way to become strong was to swallow other countries, expanding one's territory. At the present, Yan was like a juicy pork chop as it had been greatly weakened by its fight with Zhao.

Dian Dan wasn't doing any favors for Lu Buwei either. For instance, the assassination of Xu Xian will actually intensify Qin's internal power struggle. This can only benefit Qi.

Also Lu Buwei should have had to offer something in return. One possibility was to have Prince Dan killed within Qin's borders. If Yan loses this tower of strength, its loss in morale and strength will be incalculable. Tian Dan would then find it even easier to invade and occupy Yan.

With the abrupt question, they were all suddenly clearer about Tian Dan and Lu Buwei's conspiracy.

Ji Yanran somberly said: "If we cannot kill Tian Dan this time, Yan will be

finished."

Shan Rou ground her teeth and said: "This time he will not escape!" Ji Yanran replied: "Zhongli's Xia Ruzhang is intimately related with Tian Dan and may notify him after hearing news of us. If he switches to an overland route, it would be difficult for us to pursue him."

Xiang Shaolong heart was stirred and he said: "Since this is the case, we should beat him at his own game. We should deliberately frighten Xia Ruzhang to determine where Tian Dan is. Then he can forget about returning to Qi alive."

Two days later in the morning, the three big ships sailed into Zhongli's large harbor.

Xia Ruzhang came to find out their purpose.

The commander in charge of the Chu soldiers was Li Yuan's trusted aide called Li Guang. He was extremely astute. He went down to meet Xia Ruzhang on receiving Xiang Shaolong's instructions.

After he had let Xia Ruzhang inspect the military order that Li Yanyan had personally signed and sealed, Li Guang lowered his voice and said: "We have come to the East this time on a secret mission."

Xia Ruzhang started and asked: "What is the matter?" Li Guang pulled him aside and replied: "The general must have heard news of the matters in Shouchun."

Xia Ruzhang forced a smile and said: "Not only have I heard rumors, I received the official communique yesterday. It is hard to imagine that Lord Chunshen would end up like this. He must have been senile."

Li Guang said: "He was not senile, but mistakenly trusted a villain's words. Not only did he send men to kill the Qin envoy who was en route to the late King's funeral, he also mounted a rebellion. Empress Dowager and Minister Li were furious, ordering us to lead an army to hunt the person down. General Xia should know who I am speaking of!" Xia Ru Zhang's expression changed repeatedly. He gravely asked: "Could General Li be a little more explicit?"

Li Guang replied: "Who could it be other than the treacherous bandit Tian Dan? Does General Xia have news of him?" Xia Ruzhang's limbs shivered and he said with difficulty: "No." Li Guang knew exactly what was happening, but did not expose him. He whispered: "Tian Dan has to be escaping by water. Can General Xia order people to resupply our three ships immediately? I wish to set sail before dusk."

Of course Xia Ruzhang could not refuse. Li Guang then left him alone and returned to the ship.

After Xia Ruzhang instructed his subordinates, he hurriedly returned to the city.

At that point, Xiang Shaolong had already infiltrated the city. With him were the three ladies Ji Yanran, Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi dressed in men's clothing, as well as Teng Yi, Jing Shan, Wu Guang, Wu Yan and Wu Shu and the rest of the eighteen guardians, and finally Li Guang's deputy Cai Yong. Since they all

had official passes, entering and exiting the city was no problem.

As Xia Ruzhang reached the city, he rushed back to his residence without pause.

It was broad daylight. The general's residence was also heavily guarded. Xiang Shaolong and the rest could only sigh at the high wall and split up to monitor each entrance, waiting for nightfall.

Fortunately for them, it was not long before the Xia Ruzhang in civilian garb and two household warriors slipped out the back door and rode quickly towards the South gate.

They were all delighted and followed from a distance.

Xia Ru Zhang went straight out of the South gate and proceeded across the countryside. At dusk, he arrived at a manor concealed in the woods.

Outside the forest grove, a river flowed from the Northwest, joining with the Huai River five miles downstream and flowing East.

There seemed to be a small wharf there, with four large fishing boats moored.

They all rejoiced.

Teng Yi said: "I will go and clean up the boats and the men in them. Third

Brother should enter the manor and deal with Tian Dan. Be careful, Tian Dan has many followers and they are mean." Leading half the guardians, he headed for the wharf.

Xiang Shaolong exhorted Ji Yanran, saying: "Yanran should lead Zhi Zhi and remain outside the manor, using the crossbows to stop anyone from escaping or to kill them. I will infiltrate the manor with Sister Rou to see if Tian Dan is inside."

Ji Yanran gave a terse affirmation and spread out with the rest.

Xiang Shaolong gave Shan Rou a signal and they both infiltrated the manor quick as the devil. In a short while and without incident, they arrived at the underbrush along the manor's Eastern wall.

As this manor was surrounded by high walls, it was not possible to see what was happening inside from close up.

At this point, the night had descended, the stars were in the sky and the moonlight was bewildering.

Dim light escaped from the manor. The two of them used a rope to straddle the high wall and noiselessly dropped into the open courtyard behind the wall.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou climbed up the roof ridge of the nearest residence. They saw rows upon rows of rooms and for a moment did not know where to begin.

Shan Rou whispered into his ear: "Tian Dan likes South facing houses. Let us look into that block."

Xiang Shaolong looked towards where she was pointing, but only saw landscaped gardens in the South. These gardens were filled with flowers and trees, ponds and miniature rock mountains and pavilions. A brook flowed through the garden, forded by white bridges. It was peaceful and tranquil. The other half was filled with high buildings.

With one look, one could tell that this manor was a summer retreat for high ranking officials. It was probably also Xia Ruzhang's private estate which Tian Dan was borrowing for his use.

Without speaking, the two of them vaulted over numerous roofs in one breath. They came to the center of the manor and discovered human voices and images on the other side of the little bridge. The two of them did not dare to be careless. They kept their distance and using their grappling hooks, they traversed the treetops towards another tall tree on the other bank of the brook before dropping back to ground. Thus they bypassed the sentries. Next they climbed up to the roof of a tall brightly-lit building.

Human voices carried up from below.

They heard Tian Dan's voice saying: "Is this is for real? Logically, Li Yuan should not have been able to overcome Lord Chunshen."

The next voice was Xia Ruzhang's, saying: "Its definitely true. I received Empress Dowager's official command yesterday to monitor the mountain

pass closely. The communiqué also announced that Li Quan, Li Ling, Dou Jie and Cheng Suning had all been publicly beheaded."

The two of them rejoiced and could't help giving each other a kiss. After untold hardships, they had caught up to the old thief Tian Dan.

Tian Dan was speechless for a while before coldly snorting: "Li Yuan is really foolhardy, sending people to hunt me down. Ruzhang, why don't you follow me back to Qi?"

Xia Ruzhang sighed: "My family and property are all here. How can I go at will? We can discuss this matter later. The most important question now is how to plan for Minister Tian's safe return."

After a pause, he continued: "They managed to guess that you would return to Qi by the waterways. If Minister Tian leaves by the land route, they will chase empty air. I think Minister Tian should not wait for General Dan Chu anymore. As long as Minister Tian returns to Qi safely, no matter how much guts Li Yuan has, he would not dare to touch Dan Chu and the rest."

Xiang Shaolong did not have any more interest in their conversation. He kissed Shan Rou again and said: "Second Brother should have cleaned up the people at the docks. Let us create a little confusion, are you ready?" Shan Rou's eyes betrayed deep emotion and she whispered: "I have waited for more than ten years!" Xiang Shaolong raised the signal rocket in his hand.

The fireworks flew skywards and exploded into a blood red flower of light.

Chapter 11

Avenging the Great Enmity

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou started their ferocious attack. From their vantage point up in the roof, they rapidly shot down more than ten men before Teng Yi and the rest forced open the gates and rushed into the manor.

The two were puzzled when they did not see Tian Dan escape from inside the building. They rapidly climbed up the roof and entered the room through the skylight. There, they quickly found a secret tunnel that Tian Dan and his men used to escape. They plunged in immediately, giving chase.

The tunnel was wide and straight, reinforced with wooden pillars and rammed earth panels. It even had ventilation ducts, demonstrating its meticulous construction.

The two of them did not dare to light a torch and could only grope forward using the wall as a guide. They soon reached the other end of the tunnel, realizing that it actually emptied out into the fringe of the forest grove. Right outside the grove stood the little wharf. The fishing boats had long been scuttled. Ten over human shadows were escaping upriver along the bank.

Xiang Shaolong fired a signal rocket before the two of them gave chase.

After a mad sprint, six of the opponents fell back, drew their swords and attacked towards them.

How would Xiang Shaolong have the patience to dicker with them? He drew out his flying needles, waved his hands and shot out the needles under the cover of night. The six men fell to the ground en masse.

The remaining seven enemies did not anticipate that their six comrades could not even delay them by one second. With a shout of command, they left the river bank and scattered towards a small hill and the jungle by the river.

Xiang Shaolong fired another two needles, instantly felling two more enemies.

Shan Rou's bloodlust was kindled and she threw her flying dagger. An enemy who had just started climbing the hill was hit in the back and tumbled down. At this moment, Shan Rou recognized one of the men racing up the hill as Tian Dan. Strength surged into her legs from God knows where as she overtook Xiang Shaolong, flying up the hill like an arrow, catching up with the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong feared for her safety and gathering his energy, chased up the hill.

The sound of clashing blades rang out. Shan Rou's delicate shouts interspersed with the enemy's blood-curdling shrieks. However, peace and tranquility was quickly restored.

By the time Xiang Shaolong reached the hilltop, the two fighters had already separated. They were both covered with blood. Fresh blood flowed from Shan Rou's left arm and right shoulder.

Tian Dan was holding a long sword facing Shan Rou. His diaphragm was heaving up and down. His face was pale as a corpse under the moonlight.

Tian Dan took a glimpse at Xiang Shaolong and laughed bitterly, saying: "Bravo, you have finally caught me!" Shan Rou said vehemently: "Tian Dan, do you know who I am?" Hoofbeats sounded. Teng Yi and the rest arrived with torches, surrounding the three people in a circle.

Zhao Zhi shrieked and flew down her horse, viciously shouting: "When you put the three generations of my family to death, did you ever think there would be this day?" Shan Rou said icily: "He is mine. I want to kill him with my own hands!" Xiang Shaolong went to Zhao Zhi's side and whispered: "Let your Sister Rou do it!" With a "Hua" sound, Zhao Zhi leaned into Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and started crying agitatedly.

Tian Dan remained calm and laughed loudly, saying: "I Tian Dan have killed countless people in my lifetime. How can I remember whom I have killed before? Xiang Shaolong, you are good. I Tian Dan submit to you!" Reversing his blade, he slashed his neck and fell backwards, dying instantly.

Shan Rou's entire body began to shiver and she knelt down.

Zhao Zhi rushed over and held her tightly.

The two women cried bitterly on each other's shoulders. Their cries resonated through the whole forest.

This category defining, ruthless and ambitious person had finally perished.

Teng Yi jumped off his horse, cut off Tian Dan's head and shouted mightily: "Let us go!" Xiang Shaolong was numb in his heart.

It was a feeling that was hard to describe.

On the one hand he was pleased that Shan Rou, her sisters and Teng Yi had avenged the extermination of their family.

He had also accomplished an impossible goal himself.

But seeing this historically celebrated character committing suicide in front of him gave him a sense of loss.

Still, this had all become an unchangeable piece of history.

When Xiao Pan ascends the throne and the evil Lu Buwei had been killed, he would leave this warring central plains and live the peaceful secluded life he had always dreamed of. He would never again return to the central plains.

They returned to their ships and set sail back to Shouchun.

That evening the whole party drank themselves silly and slept all day the next day before waking at different times.

Xiang Shaolong came to the cabin with a hangover. The three ladies were chatting in a low voice. They looked happy and at ease.

Zhao Zhi gleefully called out: "Shaolong, Sister Rou is willing to return with us

to Xianyang!" Xiang Shaolong was extremely pleased and replied: "That day you really were lying to me!" Shan Rou displayed an unreasonable yet lovely look and said: "Told you I was bluffing long ago. I'm still angry when I think about it. You were totally unaffected."

Ji Yanran laughed and said: "Sister Rou should not be angry. Our husband keeps everything in his heart. His words are hard but his heart is soft. You must not blame him!" Shan Rou replied disdainfully: "He is your husband, what does that have to do with Shan Rou?" She then giggled lovably and gave him a sweet smile.

Everyone knew her disposition and naturally nobody took her words for real.

They sailed upriver. The ship moved slowly. They took a day more returning than they did setting out, eventually reaching Shouchun.

Xiang Shaolong did not stop but continued sailing towards Chengyang as he had promised Madam Zhuang that he would visit her for few days as he passed by Dian on his way home.

After disembarking, they rendezvoused with their special forces troops and headed South towards Dian.

Madam Zhuang and her son was accompanied by the freshly minted General Dong Luzi. He commanded eight thousand Chu soldiers and had recovered most of the territory occupied by the rebel army. As the people of Dian found out that Zhuang Baoyi had returned, they revolted in large numbers and joined the new Dian army. This army grew to about twenty thousand people

and they joined hands with the Chu army. They were presently besieging the Dian capital Gaoze.

Gaoze sits on a plateau with its back against a mountain, truly an impregnable stronghold. Since the city had adequate water and food, the allied army had not been able to defeat the defenders and had even lost close to a thousand men.

Witnessing the demise of the Yelang King, all the vassal states dispatched armies in the restorative effort. The Qielan King even led the soldiers himself, forcing entry into the Yelang capital and setting up a new ruler before returning in triumph. From then, Yelang people were never again strong enough to bully the neighboring vassal states.

As Xiang Shaolong and his men reached the allied army camp at Gaoze, the besieging soldiers had just suffered a defeat. Casualties littered the field, piled on one another.

When Lou Wuxin and Madam Zhuang knew that Xiang Shaolong had come as promised, they were overjoyed at the unexpected news and ushered everyone into the camp.

Lou Wuxin wanted to organize a feast to welcome the party from their journey but was refused tactfully by Xiang Shaolong. They held a meeting immediately at the commander's tent, looking for ways to defeat the city.

After listening to Lou Wuxin detail Gaoze's terrain and environment, Xiang Shaolong calmly said: "The most formidable characteristic of the city is that it

is set against the mountain. We will use this to our advantage. I can guarantee that we will be in the city within three days."

Madam Zhuang, Lou Wuxin and the rest of the high-ranking officers all bugged their eyes in disbelief.

That night, Xiang Shaolong and his party marched through the night and arrived at the rocky mountain behind Gaoze before setting camp and organizing his soldiers.

The next morning after Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had thoroughly reconnoitered the mountain, they identified five routes of approach and sent men up to install metal hoops at regular intervals and to deploy climbing equipment.

These were all basic techniques taught to all the elite special forces. With the installations complete, at nightfall, Xiang Shaolong and his party used the climbing equipment and specially installed rock steps to quickly ascend to the undulating and overgrown mountaintop.

The seven to eight mile long Gaoze city wall stretched in both directions from beneath their feet.

Lou Wuxin was marshaling his army, besieging the city night and day, drawing the attention of the rebel army.

War cries and the sound of stone piercing projectiles rang out unceasingly.

Ji Yanran and the two ladies also reached the summit at this moment. They crouched beside Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi while delicately catching their breath.

Where they were, it was only about seven hundred feet from the bottom. The average person would be shocked when looking down, but it was child's play for the elite special forces who regularly trained on the moon reaching mountain near the Wu family ranch. That mountain was three times the height of this mountain.

Teng Yi issued a single command and the four especially skilled men Jing Shan, Wu Shu, Wu Ji and Dan Quan immediately abseiled down using the climbing equipment. After finding a foothold, they hammered in an iron loop and installed a new climbing apparatus.

Their equipment was built according to the designs of twenty-first century climbing experts. Resting on the overlapping loops at their waists, they glided down as fast as lightning and as easily as if they were playing a game.

The four men quickly reached the undergrowth at the foot of the mountain. They were only separated from the South-facing rear wall of the city by a moat.

The sentries on top of the wall had all gone to the other three wall segments to help in defense. Only the few sentry towers were manned. Moreover, it was difficult for the sentries to see into the pitch black area beneath the walls.

Teng Yi issued another order and the Wu family special forces followed their usual drill, sliding down under the cover of the hillside trees as well as the darkness. At this moment, Jing Shan and the rest of the four men had installed the device to traverse the moat.

Ji Yanran gazed at the ant-like civilian conscripts in the city and said: "From a cursory glance we can tell that this regime is maintained only through military force. The residents are all being forced into labour with whips."

Everyone looked closely and realized it was just as Ji Yanran had observed. The city residents were merely carrying materials under close watch and the threat of whips. They all had an expression of bitter resignation.

This moment, a mounted patrol came from one end of the wall. The patrolmen were carrying wind lamps scanning the bottom of the wall and the mountain.

Everyone had a fright and hurriedly hid themselves. Jing Shan and other others crouched at the foot of the wall. What was most worrisome were the four moat crossing contraptions. As long as the other party was alert, they would surely spot them.

Even though the contraptions had been camouflaged with a dark non-reflective grease, but they were not invisible after all.

Xiang Shaolong was born quick-witted. As the patrolmen's lamplight was almost on the contraptions, he puckered his lips and emitted a shrill sound like a night owl.

The patrolmen naturally raised their lamps towards the mountain, but were unable to see anything unusual. When they turned back, they had passed the contraptions and rapidly rode away.

Everyone was covered in a sheet of cold sweat.

Shan Rou came over and said: "At least this chap has some creative methods!" Jing Shan and the rest shot out their grappling hooks, clasped onto the wall and climbed up rapidly, agile as monkeys. They split up to take care of the sentries in the towers.

The Wu family warriors crossed the moat and started climbing the wall in groups. Their movements were nimble and quick, demonstrating astonishing efficiency.

Seeing them, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of pride. Even the twenty-first century special forces may not be at this level.

By this time, close to a thousand men have descended to the foot of the mountain. Those who had crested the wall took out their crossbows and guarded the parapets.

Teng Yi chuckled softly: "Second Brother is itching for a fight. I will go first."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Lets go together!" When Xiang Shaolong and his party had reached the top of the wall, the thousand plus Wu family elite warriors had split into four groups, preparing to attack the wall in both directions and also towards the city center.

Teng Yi fired a signal rocket to notify Lou Wuxin that they had penetrated the city successfully.

After Xiang Shaolong had assigned people to defend all the entry points on the wall, he led the three women and five hundred soldiers towards the city center.

Teng Yi was responsible for capturing the wall.

Bugles sounded.

All of a sudden, the warriors shouted as one: "The city is breached! the city is breached!" The conscripted defenders in the city were startled. The sound of killing rose to the heavens. Looking to the back wall they saw a large flag atop a tall post inscribed with the word: "Zhuang". Several hundred soldiers flew down from the walls in attack.

Those residents who were forced into labour cried out at the same time and threw down the firewood, stone and other materials that they were carrying. They dispersed and escaped, even echoing: "The city is breached! The city is breached!" The breakdown in order and discipline spread like an epidemic.

Xiang Shaolong and his contingent swarmed down the stairs on the city walls like locusts. Crossbow bolts flew like rain. The enemy soldiers fell to the ground in droves. In the blink of an eye, they had obtained control of the rear city gate and the nearby square and buildings.

Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to open the city gate and let down the

drawbridge. At the same time, he commanded men to lay out a defense grid on the rooftops of buildings.

The enemies who rushed forward were all driven back in a hail of bolts.

Their own men flowed in endlessly through the city gate. They even brought with them lances, tall shields and other heavy weaponry.

Teng Yi took advantage of the enemy's chaos and swept through each section of the Northwestern wall.

Lou Wuxin's besieging troops attacked the East gate with all their might, concentrating the enemy's attention there.

The soldiers who had occupied the Northwestern wall used their superior ground to shoot down the enemy soldiers who were rushing about trying to hinder the attackers.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the timing was opportune and waved his arm in a signal.

Row after row of Wu family warriors raised their lances and advanced towards the three gates in the East, West and North under the cover of archery fire. The battle was pitched and desperate.

The Wu family warriors on the wall shouted loudly once again: "Those who abandon their weapons and squat on the ground are not to be killed, those who abandon their weapons and squat on the ground are not to be killed!"

Repeating endlessly. This was of course a scheme that Xiang Shaolong came up with based on modern psychological warfare techniques he had learned.

Many of the residences were on fire. Raging flames rose from the rooftops, spreading to the surrounding buildings. The whole city was bathed in the orange glow of the fire. Thick smoke covered the sky. The moon and stars were obscured and dim.

The defending soldiers discarded their weapons in large numbers. They joined the city residents in squatting at the corners of the city walls, squares and thoroughfares. Their morale had dissipated.

The insides of the city had turned into a chaotic battleground. The Wu family warriors organized themselves in tight units and continuously expanded the ground under their control.

The warriors up on the city walls progressed even more swiftly. The resisting enemies were slaughtered until their blood ran like rivers. Corpses littered the parapets.

The wounded were rapidly moved to the South wall to be treated by medical specialists. The entire operation was clear and orderly.

This is the first time the special forces have demonstrated their prowess in a large scale campaign. It was truly out of the ordinary.

Under the cover of a company of archers and shield men, Xiang Shaolong led the three ladies and the eighteen guardians towards the inner castle. At this

point, the West and North gates had fallen into their control. The gates had been opened and the horses and men of the allied army were rushing into the city.

The enemy soldiers defending the inner castle resisted bitterly. Xiang Shaolong and his party threw themselves into attack, rushing left and slashing right. They broke through the inner castle gate shortly, and attacked towards the palace.

The enemy soldiers knew they had lost and discarded their weapons, surrendering by the lot.

Xiang Shaolong instructed his men to concentrate the surrendered enemy soldiers in one location under guard. Lou Wuxin and Zhuang Kong were leading a thousand elite troops and they rushed in. Once the two armies met up, they swept through the city even more quickly. In less than the time it took for a cup of tea to cool, they had attacked into the palace.

The interior of the palace was a mess, and cries of grief shook the heavens. The palace women and children were huddled in a group, trembling and asking for forgiveness. The garrison soldiers were all kneeling in surrender.

Xiang Shaolong took pity on them and found men to console them and look after them.

"Peng!" The door of the main palace hall was forced open. They saw about thirty enemy officers and soldiers in a circle with their swords raised, protecting a youth wearing royal robes and a crown. The situation was bleak.

The sounds of crying and killing outside gradually subsided. It was clear that Gaoze City had fallen into the hands of the besieging soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong and his men gathered in front of the enemy soldiers in large numbers. More than ten crossbows were aimed at the enemies at the center of the hall.

Zhuang Kong bellowed: "Surrender immediately or be killed without mercy!" Lou Wuxin moved close to Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "This kid has done much evil, raping countless women. Death is too good for him."

That youth in royal robes raised his head and yelled back: "I am Li Ling's son Li Qi. I will die before surrendering!" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "You know my preference. I'll let you take charge of this!"

Heaving a big sigh, he ushered the three ladies back out of the hall. Behind them, the sound of concentrated crossbow fire rang out along with the sound of wretched cries before gradually becoming silent again.

It had taken three days to recover Gaoze. Xiang Shaolong took his leave of Madam Zhuang, her son, the You sisters and others, all unwilling to be parted. They then hurried back to Xiangyang.

It could be said that this trip to Chu had yielded them good results. Not only did they manage to kill Tian Dan, they had also helped Chu and Dian in big way. Nonetheless because Xu Xian's status was unknown and also because Prince Dan had been captured in Xianyang, everyone's feeling of triumph was greatly diminished.

As they went through customs, their old friend An Gu personally invited them into the official building.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the Qin soldiers were all wearing a white sash on their arms and knew that things had turned for the worse.

Sure enough, An Gu said in grief: "Premier Xu was seriously injured in an ambush and died en route back to Xianyang."

A torrent of hate welled up in Xiang Shaolong and gushed towards heaven. Lu Buwei was certainly more malicious than a ravenous wolf. Just for a little personal gain, he had forgotten about Qin's overall situation. He would unscrupulously get rid of anything or anyone who got in his way.

The two of them originally had no cause for enmity, only favor. Yet he wanted to kill him just because King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan were close to him.

Now he had used such a despicable method to kill Xu Xian, it made him gnash his teeth in pain and hatred.

An Gu sighed and said: "It has been confirmed that this was perpetrated by Lord Chunshen. The Chu people have sent over Lord Chunshen's head and even offered to cede five cantons to parley for peace. But how could we let this go like this?" Xiang Shaolong rode along with him, saying in pain: "If we proceed like this, we would have succumbed to Lu Buwei's evil designs. Precisely he is now using this critical situation to expand his powers. The true culprit for Premier Xu's murder is Lu Buwei. Lord Chunshen was but a puppet

under his strings!" An Gu's countenance changed and he exclaimed: "What?"
The next day, Xiang Shaolong set off immediately for Xianyang.

It was now three days into Winter and the weather was bitter cold. Without realizing it, they had been away from Xianyang for five months.

Eighteen days later, Xianyang finally appeared before their eyes.

The elite special forces automatically returned to the Wu family ranch while Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, the women and the eighteen guardians braced their weary bodies and returned to Xianyang.

As they entered the city, they heard another piece of bad news: Lu Gong had fallen ill.

The illness was caused by anger.

The moment Xu Xian's body returned to Xianyang, Lu Gong had cried violently over the corpse, collapsing on the spot. Since then he has been ill and has not risen.

As one wave subsides another rises.

Xiang Shaolong and his party rushed towards the commander-in-chief's residence.

The moment he stepped in, he knew that something was wrong.

The residence was filled with Wang Ling and other high ranking officers, ministers and Lu Gong's family. The sound of weeping permeated the place.

While Xiang Shaolong thought that Lu Gong had already passed away, Wang Ling pulled Xiang Shaolong into the inner hall and said in deep grief: "Quick, go see the commander-in-chief one last time. He's been waiting for you, unwilling to take his last breath until you arrive."

Hot tears flowed from Xiang Shaolong's eye sockets.

He suddenly realized that in reality, he not only looked upon Lu Gong as a venerable friend and superior, deep within his heart he had also started to treat Lu Gong as a close relative. He had developed the intimacy and reluctance to part as if a son to a father.

Lu Gong was lying on a couch, his complexion as white as paper. His two eyes were tightly closed, and he breathed with difficulty.

Xiao Pan stood at his side holding his hand. His expression was shockingly calm.

Lu Dan'er knelt on his other side weeping bitterly. Two noblewomen who must be her seniors were looking after her.

Jing Jun, Lord Changwen, Lord Changping, Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, Li Si, Lao Ai and the rest were all there, standing outside the door.

Everyone let out a happy expression when they saw Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Buwei also displayed an appearance of happiness and embraced Xiang Shaolong's shoulder, softly saying: "Its good that Shaolong is back. Quickly go in and see the commander-in-chief one last time."

Xiang Shaolong really felt like slaughtering him then and there. As he was about to wrest himself out of the embrace, Lu Buwei released him.

Jing Jun rushed forward holding his brows and called out "Third Brother" and couldn't help turning hoarse and crying bitterly. Those who heard could not help but feel sad too.

Xiao Pan's imposing body started and looking over, he saw Xiang Shaolong. His eyes emitted a look of profound emotion but his expression was extraordinarily serene. He unhurriedly said: "Grand Tutor, please hurry in!" The Lu Gong who was leaning on the couch let out an "Ah" sound and awakened.

Xiao Pan gravely ordered: "Please help Miss Dan'er outside!" Lu Dan'er stood up and was about to protest when her legs gave way and she fainted into the bosom of the two noblewomen. Jing Jun rushed over and carried her out.

Xiang Shaolong came to the side of the couch. At this point only Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were in the room with Lu Gong. As Xiao Pan had not given permission, the others did not dare to enter. The only one who would dare to rush in was Lu Buwei, but he had his own motives and chose to remain outside.

Lu Gong ferociously opened his eyes and swept over the men. His face

blushed red and he unexpectedly struggled to sit up.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan glanced at each other, both fearing the worst. They knew that he had seen Xiang Shaolong and was using his last gasp of life. It would be hard to hold on after this.

The two people helped him sit up.

Hot tears flowed from the corners of of Lu Gong's eyes and he rasped: "Was Xu Xian killed by that treacherous thief?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded distressedly, his own tears falling uncontrollably.

Lu Gong grasped their hands, one in each hand. With a trembling voice, he said into their ears: "Protect the Crown Prince. Kill the traitor. Avenge me and Xu Xian. Remember this, remember!" He then breathed his last, let go of their hands and passed away.

End of Book 16